

# **A Mother's Love: The Life of Kushina**

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Prequel to A Mother's Love. Long before she ever met the man she would fall in love with she knew both the sweetness of triumph and the bitterness of defeat. Kushina X Minato

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# A ninja of Whirlpool

**Author's Notes:** As some of you may have guessed this is a prequel to my other story, A Mother's Love. To all those of you who enjoyed that one I hope you will enjoy this one too. This will be the story of Kushina from the time she became a ninja onward. For all those of you who have not read the original you won't need to in order to understand or enjoy this. This story is an AU, so please keep that in mind for later chapters. Hope you all enjoy.

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Her sensei led her to some of the sand flats near the sea. He pointed to a spot. "Stand there Kushina."

She did so.

The ninja took out a sword and drew a large circle around her in the sand. "Did you bring any food or water with you?"

"No, Chikara-sensei."

He nodded and then performed three quick hand signs. He stuck his hand down into the circles and a golden flash of light surrounded her and then was gone. Chikara wiped his hands. "If you wish to be a ninja of the Whirlpool you must remain in that circle for twenty four hours with no food or water. If you step out of the circle you will not be permitted that honor."

Kushina looked up at the grey sky. It looked like rain; it always rained in the afternoon. "Sensei, if it rains..."

"You are allowed to drink rain water Kushina." Chikara answered. He looked down at his watch. "Your twenty four hours begins right now. Good luck." With that her sensei leapt away and she was alone.

She sat down and checked her watch. It was 12:06, six minutes past noon. She went ahead and sat down to conserve her energy. It was

late spring and it was a bit warm, though it usually never got too hot, not even in the short summer time. She was not too worried about passing the academy graduation test. The test was well known and all the fourth year students had spent much of their time building up an endurance to thirst and hunger. She'd had a large breakfast and was well hydrated, she would definitely manage.

She was after all Uzumaki Kushina, daughter of the village Headsman and a proud member of the strongest clan of her village. She wore the black and red bodysuit like a badge of honor. Everyone who saw her in it immediately knew what clan she was a part of.

From her back she pulled out her sword and looked at it. It was a good sharp blade made from good steel. But it was no katana. She smiled.

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"Good luck today Kushina," her father smiled at her.

"My baby is graduating today! She is going to be a ninja!" Her mother grabbed her and began to smother her with kisses.

"Mooooom," she whined. "I'm not a baby; I'm going to be a ninja!" She looked at her father eagerly. "Will I get something special after I pass the test?"

He gave her a blank look. "Like what?"

"A katana!" she said excitedly. "I want a katana like all the ninja in our clan!"

Her father quirked an eyebrow and had that look that she knew meant he was trying not to laugh. "And what makes you think you deserve a katana?"

"You gave one to Urusai and Temjin when they graduated." It was true; her two older brothers had both gotten their katanas after passing the graduation test.

"Kushina!" Her mother said sharply. "Your brother's name is Shinzou not, 'Shut Up.' Show your older brother some respect."

Kushina crossed her arms and looked defiant. "Why should I? He's a meanie!"

Her mother shook her head wearily. "Have you ever thought that if you would stop playing those pranks on him he would be nicer to you?"

"If he were nicer to me I wouldn't play so many pranks!"

Her mother groaned knowing all too well that neither her daughter nor her oldest son could see the vicious cycle they were in.

Her father just chuckled, which earned a look from mom. "You better get going dear." He leaned down and gave her a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. "I know you will make me and the clan very proud."

"I will dad, and when I come back I better get a katana."

"We'll see." Was all her father would say.

---

Leaving the main house everyone wished her well. The entire family wanted her to succeed, and she wouldn't let them down. Temjin wished her luck, but Urusai (to her he was always Urusai and never Shinzou) was oddly absent. She grinned, certain she knew why.

Outside it was a crisp cool morning. She could smell the ocean on the wind. Near the gate she spotted her cousin Daiichi, he was in her class and also taking the graduation test today. Uncle Saishu and aunt Nitsune were giving him last minute encouragement. Daiichi was a really good hearted boy who tried hard. Unfortunately, he just wasn't a very good ninja. He had poor chakra control, his taijutsu was sloppy, his jutsus were weak, and worst of all he was a painfully average swordsman in a clan famed for its swordsmanship. She was only twelve and not yet a ninja but she was already considered a first

level blade master. Her father and uncle Saishu were fifth level blade masters.

She frowned, as was her meanie brother Urusai, the clan heir and genius. Why did everyone think he was so great? So he was a fifth level blade master and an ANBU captain. So what? He was seventeen and had been a ninja for a whole *five* years. She was sure that by the time she was 17 she would be *much* better than dumb old Urusai.

"Hey Kushina!" Daiichi bid his parents goodbyes and ran up to her. "Are you ready for the test?" He sounded a little nervous.

She gave him a huge smile and a nod. "Of course! I'm sure the whole class will pass. I mean we have to, the village needs every ninja it can get."

Daiichi nodded. Being part of a ninja clan and having the clan head also be the village Headsman they both heard things.

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Dinner the previous night.

"There was another attack along the border yesterday." Ususai said frowning. He didn't seem to have much of an appetite. "There were six people killed this time."

Up and down the long dinner table there mere mutters of, 'damn rock nins' and half whispered curses.

"The rock nins seem to be a bit friskier than usual of late." Her father said.

"It's not just with us either." Uncle Saishu said. "There are rumors that they've sent expeditions in Grass and Star countries as well. There have been reports of a lot of fighting just about everywhere along their border."

"It makes sense," Urusai said. "Sand is fighting Leaf and Mist is at war with Lightning, the damn rock nins probably want to see how far they can push."

Her father shook his head. "Grass has a pact with the leaf nins. Sarutobi will never allow earth country to get a stronghold on his border."

"Well that's presuming the leaf nins can actually do anything." Saishu said. "Their war with Suna seems to have sucked in most of their resources. They might not have the strength to spare."

Her father grinned. "Don't ever underestimate the leaf nins, they have a nasty habit of surprising the people who do."

"Well I don't much care what happens in Grass country or in Leaf or in Wind. I'm a lot more interested in what's going on here." Urusai said. "People say all this fighting is turning into a third great ninja war. I'm sure Earth country wants to add us and Waterfall to their territory."

"They have always wanted that." Father said solemnly. "That is why we must always be ready to defend Whirlpool."

"We are as ready as we can be." Urusai assured. "But there are a lot more of them than there are of us."

"Well then we had better get some reinforcements." Her father looked at her and gave her a wink.

She sat up proudly. She would help protect her country from the damn rock nins.

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"The village is depending on us! The clan is depending on us!" She looked to her cousin with fire in her eyes. "We have to pass, we can't let them down."



His cousin's sudden enthusiasm was kind of scary. He smiled and nodded, and carefully put some space between them.

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A hard land makes a hard people. That was one of the many saying that her mom loved. But she thought it was pretty true. Whirlpool could be a harsh place, especially during a winter storm. Her father had often told her that their graduation test was deliberately cruel to prepare you for the difficult realities of being ninja. For her this was not so bad, she had spent many days going from sunrise to sunset without food or water to prepare for this. Most of her classmates had done the same.

It rained in the afternoon as it almost always did. She put on her poncho and drank some of the rainwater. She rested while the sun was out and went to sleep as soon as it was dark, her battle suit kept her warm enough. When the sun came up again she was thirsty and hungry, but the idea of leaving the circle never crossed her mind.

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When she spotted someone coming towards her she immediately checked her watch. It was still only 11:36; she still had half an hour to go. When she saw who it was though she stood up and smiled, her brother Urusai had just arrived.

"Nice eyebrows." Kushina said innocently.

"Thanks," Urusai replied without any emotion.

His eyebrows had been shaved off and been drawn back in with ink.

"You know kooky you really are the best in our whole family when it comes to stealth. But then again since we're combat specialists I don't suppose that's saying very much."

Kushina sniffed and crossed her arms. She *hated* being called kooky. "You're just mad because you can never catch me."

Urusai flopped down in the sand and relaxed. "Well I probably could if I really worked on it. But some of us prefer to be well versed with the sword."

"I'm a blade master!" She reminded him angrily. Urusai had an absolute gift for getting under her skin. He seemed to do it about as easily as he drew breath.

He waved that away. "First level blade master, our clan has *ten* ninja who are second level or higher. And none of *them* still have to work on the circle drill."

She glared at him; it figures he would bring that up. "Just you wait! Some day I'll be a much greater ninja than you and a way better swordsman! You are so totally overrated."

"I am? Well please don't tell the ANBU, they might take away my captain's rank."

"What are you doing here anyway? I thought I was supposed to be alone until the twenty four hours were up."

"Technically you are, but so long as I don't give you any food or water it won't affect you passing the test. I just wanted to come out here and cheer on my little sister." He casually reached into his back pack and pulled something out.

"Hey!" Kushina shouted. "Are those my cookies?!"

"Oh, you mean the special double mint fudge ones you keep hidden way in the back of your closet where you think no one will find them? Yeah, these are yours." He popped one into his mouth and began chewing. "Mmmmm, oh these are soooooo, good! I can see why you like them so much." He took a couple more and tossed them in. "You know it's a real shame they don't sell these anywhere in the village. I mean they're so hard to get, you have to import them all the way from Fire country. These are probably the only ones for a hundred

miles." As soon as he swallowed what was in his mouth he had another. "And they are soooo good."

Kushina stood there being consumed by hunger and thirst forced to watch as her brother devoured her precious cookies.

"I hate you." She turned her back to him and sat back down. She didn't have to look but she heard him laugh before he got back to eating.

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The whole clan turned out to greet her and Daichi as they made their weary way home. They had both passed the test and been awarded whirlpool hitai-ites. They both wore them around their foreheads with great pride.

The clan threw a huge celebration to honor their two new ninja. Kushina ate and drank to her heart's content. (Though she still would have liked to have had her cookies.)

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Late that evening her father took her to his office.

"This is yours now Kushina." From behind his desk he handed her a katana in its sheath.

"Yes!" She shouted. Even more than the hitai-ite this was a true symbol that she was a ninja. Or more specifically, that she was an Uzumaki ninja. "Thank you dad, I love it." She immediately pulled it out so she could admire the razor sharp edges that only a katana possessed.

"Now I know that after all this time I don't have to remind you to treat a sword with respect." He said while reminding his daughter of exactly that. "And a katana is much more than an ordinary sword; it is a part of you. You must name it and give it just a little bit of your soul."

"I know dad!" She was so excited.

"Have you chosen a name for yours?" Her father asked.

He nodded and placed her left hand over the blade. "You are Homeward, because no matter how much trouble I may get into, you will always help me find the way home again." She let the sword cut into his palm. "Taste of me and know me, for you are part of me now."

Her father nodded. "A good name daughter and a good sentiment." He reached down and hugged his little twelve year old. "I love you and I am proud of you Kushina."

"I love you too dad." She smiled and was happy.

For from this day forward she was a ninja of Whirlpool.

## Team four

Whirlpool was a small country and a poor one. It was jammed between Earth to the west and Waterfall to the east. At its widest point the land stretched only about fifty miles, and in the whole country there might have been a total of two hundred thousand people. The land itself was wet and cold. There were almost no trees, the hilly and craggy ground being mostly covered by tall sweet grass. There were also plenty of bogs where people could be sucked in without a trace. In the country side there were settlements and small farms grew wheat and potatoes. There were many flocks of sheep as the grass was ideal for them. The land had almost no mineral wealth except for a few veins of iron.

The country was based around the ninja village, being really a sort of city state. The village was on the ocean and had wide docks that were always busy except during winter storms. Most of the ships were tiny fishing boats manned by local crews. The waters were well stocked and fresh fish was a staple of the local diet. Nearly all the boats were run by sail. The only coal or oil powered ships were the freighters and other trade ships that came through. Being only a small port it was rare for more than one or two to show up in a week. Whirlpool sent sheep and fish and a little iron to nearly every other country with a port.

Except for Earth country.

For nearly a hundred years earth and the damn rock nins had been trying to swallow up their neighbors. But the people of Whirlpool were a fiercely independent bunch who loved their land and their freedom and were determined to keep both. The ninja village had been founded almost out of self defense in order to keep foreign forces out. Among the original founders had been a small clan of sword ninja called the Uzumaki. They had originally been called something else but had changed their name in honor of their new home.

In the heart of the village was the Uzumaki estate. It was surrounded by a ten foot wall made of the same mud bricks as all the local buildings. In the very middle of the estate was a large fifty room house. This was not a mansion; Whirlpool had no mansions, but was called the main house. Located behind the main house were ten smaller ones where different branches of the family resided. There was also a very large blacksmith shop with a massive forge and stockpile of iron and coal. Those Uzumakis who failed to become ninja usually took up the trade of blacksmith and weapon smith. All the weapons (including the katanas) and armor used by the Uzumaki were made there.

In the large compound there were several trees, they were just ordinary maple and pine trees but were a rare and exotic sight for the locals. During most days the compound would be filled with children. The very youngest would be playing and watching, the older ones would be exercising and practicing with wooden swords. The Uzumaki were famous for their swordsmanship. (In Earth country they were despised for it.) And each generation was given training and readied to carry on the tradition.

Above everything else the Uzumaki valued family and loyalty. Betrayal and abandoning your family were considered the two most heinous crimes, far worse than mere murder or theft. The entire family shared dinner together each night. And though there was a, 'head' family there was never any sense of privilege or distinction. Any one could say anything to the clan head without fear. Any one *inside* the family could. But outsiders were wise to be a bit careful. Along with their swordsmanship the Uzumaki were also famous for their vendettas. The Uzumaki were definitely not believers in the whole, 'turn the other cheek' idea. If you slapped an Uzumaki's cheek you were running a serious risk of losing that hand. They were definitely not people to swallow insults or threats. And if you insulted one you insulted them all.

Of course this refusal to accept insult also applied to within the family.

It was five in the morning and Kushina was dressed and ready for a dangerous mission. She put her special equipment into a pouch and exited silently out her bedroom window. She had fine chakra control and had no trouble walking along the side of the house to another window. Looking in she saw the window was locked of course. That only made her smile.

*Why does he even bother?*

She took out some wire. She performed a jutsu careful to use a very minimal amount of chakra. " **Wire Animation Technique.**"

The wire seemed to come to life and began moving almost like a snake. Slipping in through a crack it slid along the top of the window to the lock. Wrapping itself about the handle it slowly pulled back unlocking it. Once that was done she quickly called back the wire and ended her jutsu. She slowly and carefully lifted the window open. One slip or squeak now and she would be dead meat. With the window two thirds open she slid into the room. Gently putting her feet on the floor she slowly and carefully crept over to the target.

Urusai was asleep in his bed. She had to be careful, like most ninja he was a light sleeper. She took the shaving cream out of her pouch. She began filling his right hand with a huge glob of the stuff. With that done she set the now empty can on the floor. With one finger she gently pressed against his cheek, which caused him to bring his hand to his face.

Seeing his face now covered in shaving cream she just couldn't help it, she laughed.

Urusai instantly came awake and sat up in his bed with a kunai in his hand. He saw her standing there and immediately knew what had happened.

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Kushina's parents were both still sound asleep when they got a wake up call.

" **Get back here!!**" They heard Shinzou scream loud enough to wake the dead. About two seconds after that the door to their bedroom burst open and Kushina ran in and leapt onto the bed. She dove for her mother and quickly latched on to her.

"Mom! Urusai is going to kill me!"

Both of her parents were now awake as Shinzou entered the bedroom his face still covered in shaving cream and killer intent coming off him in waves. "Kooky you are so dead!"

"Mooooooooom!" The little girl wailed.

Her mother comforted her while her father let out an exasperated sigh. "No one is killing anyone Kushina. Shinzou put the kunai away."

Frowning he placed it on a night stand as he was currently dressed in nothing but boxers. "I wasn't going to kill her; I was just going to cut off all her hair."

"Mooooooooom!" Kushina shouted.

Her father shook his head. "Honey why don't you help your mother make breakfast while I talk to your brother?"

Her mother put on a robe and went downstairs to the kitchen as Shinzou stood there glaring at a now content Kushina. When they were both gone he looked at his father ready to spit nails. "This has got to stop! I am sick of her stupid tricks!"

"So you want a severe punishment?" His father asked.

"Yes! She needs to be taught a lesson! It's bad enough she was doing this before, but now she's a Genin. This behavior has to stop."

"I agree," his father replied. "But the usual punishments don't affect her and I refuse to do anything drastic for mere pranks."



"Pranks?" Shinzou sounded outraged. "She dyed all my clothes *pink* last week!" He was still furious about that.

His father thought about it for a moment. "All right Shinzou, what would you say if I allowed you to be the one to discipline her?"

He suddenly had an evil grin. "You'll let me cut off her hair?"

"No, but what I will do is..."

Shinzou listened to the surprising idea. "Are you serious father? Isn't that against the rules?"

His father shook his head. "Actually there's no rule against it. So what do you think?"

The evil smile returned. "I think kooky is going to regret the day she decided to make me a lab rat for her pranks."

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After breakfast Kushina and Daiichi headed to the academy for the very last time. They were both wearing the Uzumaki battle suit, (all black except for a thick stripe of dark red along the side.) They also had on their hitai-ites and their new katanas.

Arriving at their old classroom Kushina quickly counted up the bodies and was pleased to see all twelve had made it. She glanced to where Aguri was sitting, she sighed, he was soooo cute! And of course that annoying Orimi was sitting next to him hogging all his attention.

"Why does he even like her?" Kushina muttered.

Daiichi heard her and decided to give her an answer. "Maybe he just likes blondes?"

She looked at her cousin as though he were an idiot. "Who cares about that?" She snapped her head back to allow her long red hair

fall back over her shoulder. "There's nothing special about blonde hair, I think it looks ugly."

"Sure," not wanting to argue about something so pointless he just took a seat.

Since the spot near Aguri was taken she sat down as well. She kept looking over in his direction. *I'll bet we end up on the same team together! Then I'll get to spend all my time with him.* She began to fantasize about saving him from a horde of damn rock nins and having him fall hopelessly in love with her.

She was busy dreaming about her wedding when Chikara-sensei finally arrived.

Their sensei gave them all a pleased smile. "I am very proud of all of you and am proud to call myself your sensei. I know each and every one of you will make your families and you village proud. Now since there are twelve of you There will be four teams this year. All your senseis are very strong and experienced. Listen to what they have to teach you and if you continue to work hard I know you will do well." His eyes drifted to Daiichi for just a second. "Now I will read off your teams and tell you the room number where your sensei is waiting, please go there and introduce yourselves. Since I am sure you're all anxious I'll go ahead and start."

Kushina's dreams died a very quick death as Aguri and Orimi were assigned to team one. She wound up on team four with her cousin Daiichi and a ninja named Hideo. Hideo was pretty good, not great but good, but he was a bit weird in that he specialized in the bow for a weapon. *So I have a weakling and a guy who likes to shoot things for teammates. I guess I'll have to be the leader.*

The three of them headed for room 101 where their sensei was waiting.

"Kushina isn't it unusual to have two members of one clan on the same team?" Daiichi asked.

Kushina gave him a reassuring pat on the back. "I'm sure sensei had his reasons."

"Chikara probably just figures that since you're so weak you'll need another Uzumaki there to protect you." Hideo said.

Kushina sent her new teammate a hard look. "Don't call my cousin weak!" *Even if he is.*

Hideo suddenly looked a little nervous. There was a famous saying in Whirlpool country, 'never piss off the Uzumaki.' "Sorry, just kidding."

Kushina nodded and let it go. When they got to room 101 she was the first to burst in.

"Hello sensei I'm..." her eyes grew and her voice died in her throat.

The boys followed her in and were also surprised.

"Another Uzumaki?" Hideo said.

"Cousin," Daiichi said. "Are you our new sensei?"

Leaning back against the far wall he was grinning. "I sure am Daiichi, and you must be Hideo right?" The other boy nodded. "I am Uzumaki Shinzou formerly an ANBU captain and currently sensei to this squad. You will both address me as Shinzou-sensei." He gave his little sister a malevolent grin. "You will address me as Kami."

She shut her eyes and moaned. It had started off as such a good day!

## Circle drills

"This is not possible! There's no way you can be my sensei." Kushina declared when she finally got over her initial shock.

"And yet here I am." Shinzou said pleasantly.

"Does father know about this?" Kushina demanded.

"Who do you think came up with the idea?"

Kushina gaped at him open mouthed. "I don't believe you."

Shinzou shrugged. "Ask him about it later. Now the three of you sit down I want to talk to all of you." The two boys took seats while Kushina dragged her feet and flopped down dejected.

"I really don't believe this." Kushina muttered.

Shinzou grinned and decided to take a little mercy on her. "I'll give you a break; you don't have to call me Kami. But whenever we are in the field or in training I expect you to call me Shinzou-sensei or sensei, at those times I am not your brother; I am your sensei and you will never treat me as anything else."

"I'm not calling you sensei, Urusai." Kushina dug in her heels.

"Twenty push ups." He continued without giving her a chance to object. "Or you can explain to father why you were being insubordinate to your superior."

She looked at him angrily, but got out of her seat and quickly performed the push ups. It was a law of the village that orders from a superior had to be obeyed. She knew her father would not be pleased if he heard she was disobeying orders on her first full day as a ninja. When she was done she got up and sat back down again.

Shinzou nodded, satisfied. "All right Kooky."

"Hey," she objected. "If I can't call you Urusai then you can't call me Kooky."

"Actually, as sensei I can call you pretty much whatever I like... Koo... ky."

"That's not fair."

Shinzou shrugged. "Life is not fair and a ninja's life is definitely not fair." Once she was seated Shinzou took a minute to just look them over. "Now then, let me explain to you how things are going to be. As your sensei I have two responsibilities to you. I am expected to teach you and protect you. As my students your responsibility is to obey me and always give me your best effort."

Daiichi nervously lifted his hand.

"Yes Daiichi?"

"What are you going to teach us sensei?"

"Everything I can." Shinzou frowned. "I had requested a month's time to train you, but I was only given two weeks. So I'll concentrate on your weaknesses for now, but as long as we are a unit I will continue to train you as time permits."

Kushina didn't like that. She knew her father was the only one who could ever overrule her brother.

"What happens in two weeks?" Kushina asked.

Shinzou noted the lack of a sensei, but as long as she wasn't deliberately disrespectful he thought he could deal with it. "That's when we'll be going on our first mission." He saw she had more questions but waved them away. "Don't worry about that for now. Trust me; the training will be enough to keep you very busy for the next two weeks."

He was sitting on the edge of the teacher's desk and reached over to pull up three folders.

"I've gone over your academy records and they've given me an idea of where to concentrate with each of you."

Daiichi raised his hand again.

"Yes?"

"Are you going to teach us any new jutsus?" All three of their eyes lit up.

He dashed their hopes with a shake of his head. "I'm afraid not, learning a jutsu properly takes time and we don't have any. I have too many other things to worry about." He opened the first folder. "For instance, let's take a look at Hideo here. Now so you all know I don't care about your academics at this point. Whether or not you were good with algebra won't help much in the field. Hideo your endurance was average, taijutsu average, chakra control average, basic weapons average; your class rank was sixth. Your sensei did make a note that you excelled with the use of your bow."

The boy immediately sat up a bit straighter and smiled. "Thank you sensei."

Shinzou shot him a surprise look. "I wasn't complimenting you. It's all well and good to have a specialty, but you need to develop your other skills too. What do you plan to do the first time you run into a damn rock nin?"

"Shoot him with my bow." The boy said with certainty.

"Well that's fine, if you get a nice clean target at distance. Maybe all the rock nins you run into will be nice enough to wear bull's-eyes or bright orange jumpsuits, but I tend to doubt it. You will have to fight in close at some point and that's what you need to work on. I want you to leave your bow and arrows at home for the next two weeks."

"But if I do that I'll get rusty!"

Shinzou shook his head. "Your bow is your strength, what you need to work on now are your weaknesses." He closed Hideo's folder and put it on the desk.

He opened the second folder. "Daiichi, your endurance was poor, taijutsu poor, chakra control very poor, basic weapons average; your class rank was twelfth. Meaning of course you were dead last."

Daiichi hung his head. "I'm sorry Shinzou-sensei, I try my best, I really do."

Shinzou nodded. "I know that Daiichi, and I didn't reveal your standings to try and embarrass you. But the fact is you need the most work. I am going to work extra hard on your chakra control and your swordsmanship. Since you'll be using your katana for close combat we'll ignore taijutsu for now and just concentrate on those two areas." He closed the folder and put it on the desk. He opened the last folder.

"Now Kooky, your endurance was excellent, taijutsu good, chakra control excellent, basic weapons excellent; your class rank was first. You were the top academy student."

She sat up proudly and puffed out her chest. "I guess you don't have very much to teach me then."

"Oh I wouldn't say that," Shinzou gave her a sliver of a smile. "I think fixing that rotten attitude of yours will give me plenty to do."

She glared at him. "What is wrong with my attitude?"

"You think you're special and that the rules don't apply to you. Your behavior just this morning was more proof if I needed any. I will give you credit that you work very hard on your training and you obey mother and father without question. So you're not a complete spoiled brat, but you're still a brat. You've let the fact that you're an Uzumaki

and a somewhat gifted one go to your head. You've had a lot of praise and it's left you too damn cocky. That's not just bad, it's dangerous. Nothing will get you killed in the field faster than overestimating your own skills and underestimating your opponent's. In short Kooky, you need a good dose of humility, and that's what I'm here for."

"Really? I thought you were just here to make me miserable."

"That's a side benefit." Her angry glare only made him smile. "All right team four, up on your feet and follow me. It's time for our first practice. We only have two weeks and I'm not wasting any time."

"Where are we going sensei?" Hideo asked.

"We're going to the flats."

---

Being a small village things were not quite as organized and formal as in larger ninja villages like Iwa or Konoha. There were no formal training grounds per say. But just beyond the village wall was a large stretch of flat sandy ground that ran for miles along the coast. It was a large enough area to easily handle as many ninja as needed a place to train. Throughout the flats there had been additions made to help with training. Targets, obstacle courses, water traps, walls, and training posts were scattered through out and were available on a first come first serve basis.

Shinzou led his team to a spot about a half mile from the village. There was a fifteen foot tall brick wall and nothing else. He had also brought with him a couple wooden practice swords.

"All right team, from now on we will meet at exactly seven a.m. each morning at the west gate. I want all of you to bring lunch with you and plenty of water. We will train until at least five each day and possibly longer. I expect all of you to be at the gate at *exactly* seven. If you are not there it had better be because you're near death. Ninja



are expected to be dependable and since you are all ninja now I expect that from you."

He took out the two practice swords and nodded towards the wall. "Hideo and Daiichi, you'll start by working on chakra control. I want you to do the wall walking exercise until I tell you to stop."

Both boys nodded, Daiichi looked resigned.

He then turned to Kushina and tossed her one of the wooden swords.

"I'm guessing you know what comes next Kooky."

"Circle drills," the girl said with depressing certainty.

"Circle drills," Shinzou agreed with good humor. With his own practice sword he drew a circle in the sand about three and a half feet wide, just enough to let him maneuver a little. "You know how this works, come at me as hard as you can and in any way you like. All you have to do is make me step out of the circle." He grinned teasingly. "Maybe *this* time you'll manage it."

She actually let out a little growl. "I *will* knock you out this time."

"I've heard that before." He placed his left arm behind his back his back and held his sword out in the ready position. "You can begin Kooky."

She glared at him. She could see his confidence in the way he stood there and the way he held his sword out just a little too forward. His posture just seemed to scream, 'even with one arm, even with a casual pose, you still can't push me out.' He was the clan heir, an ANBU captain, a fifth level blade master like father, and the genius of the Uzumaki clan. He was the wall that always blocked her way. He was everything she aspired to be, and it ate at her that he was always better. He was older, stronger, faster, smarter, and just plain superior. And he never ever let her forget it.

She gave a shout of pure fury and ran forward determined to finally show him she was good enough. She came in sword held high as if aiming for a chest strike, at the last instant her sword dropped down in a thrust aimed at his legs. It was a good move and well disguised. She delivered it with all the speed and power she could muster. And to her disgust, though not to her surprise, she heard the loud, 'smack' of wood striking wood.

"That was sloppy," her brother admonished. "I expect better from a blade master, even just a first level one."

"Damn it!" she launched herself at him in a savage series of attacks. She knew the five dances of the blade and had mastered one of them. She began the dance of the sakura, the dance of the cherry blossoms; it was a dance of all out attack without regard to self. She left herself wide open and poured everything she had into the assault.

Shinzou could have easily struck her a dozen times but never did. He simply stood his ground and blocked everything she could throw at him. Her form had started off a bit poor and as the exercise continued it got worse and worse. Whenever Kushina got angry she always got sloppy with her sword work.

She missed badly with a strike aimed for his head and it left her completely off balance. He reached out with his left hand and tapped her shoulder; it was more than enough to send her to the ground.

"Reign in your anger and get control of your attacks, you look like a first year novice to me."

Getting up she sent him a look that should have killed him instantly. To her credit she took a moment to center herself and try to at least calm down. When she came at him again her attacks were much sharper and measured. She had switched over to the dance of the camellia, it was a form centered around deception and flexibility rather than all out attack. She again came on as hard as she could. And she could still never reach him. No matter how fast, no matter

how deceptive, no matter at what angle, whenever she tried to hit him with her sword his was always there to block.

They continued for half an hour. When he finally called a halt she dropped her sword and fell to her knees panting, she was drenched in sweat and her arms felt like they were weighed down with cement blocks.

Shinzou looked as fresh as he had at the start.

"From now on Kooky we will start and end every practice session with circle drills, until you figure out a way to knock me out."

Still panting she turned her red face up to him. "That... is... not... fair."

Shinzou shrugged. "I've already told you that life is not fair." He turned away from her to look at the boys. Hideo seemed to not have any trouble and was walking up to the top and then down again. Daiichi was another story, he kept slipping down or off at about the halfway point. He really was going to need a lot of help with chakra control.

"All right boys enough," he called out. "It's time to work on weapons."

---

For the next several hours he worked them all very hard.

And as he promised he ended the session with more circle drills for Kushina after dismissing her teammates. Kushina did no better the second time around.

When training was finally over an exhausted Kushina walked home with an only slightly tired Shinzou.

As they approached the gate to the estate Kushina lifted her head and asked her brother a question.

"So right now are you my brother or my sensei?"

He looked at her suspiciously. "From the time we meet in the morning until the time I end training I am your sensei. The rest of the time I am your brother."

"So that means right now you're my brother, right?"

He nodded warily. "That's right."

"Good." With a sudden energy he had not suspected she reared her foot back and kicked him in the ankle... hard.

"Ow! That hurt!" He immediately clutched his ankle as his sister ran towards the house laughing.

"Your name is UR... U... SAI!!!" She shouted back at him before going in the front door.

He shook his head and continued to rub his wounded ankle. This was going to be a long two weeks.

## A clan tradition

The two of them were heading back from an extra long session of practice. Kushina was rubbing her aching muscles. "You know if father ever saw one of our practice sessions he'd probably demote you down to Genin and make you work security on the docks for a whole year. You just like torturing me don't you?"

She waited a moment for him to retort but nothing came. She looked back at him. (After their first practice he made her walk in front where he could keep an eye on her.) He was walking steadily just a few paces behind. The look in his eyes said he was lost in thought.

"Hey Urusai!" she shouted. "What is wrong with you today? You've been moody the whole day."

He seemed to wake from a trance and see her. He just shook his head lightly. "It's nothing Kooky."

"Oh right, I'll just bet you're thinking up new ways to torture me aren't you?"

He gave her an annoyed look. "Oh stop being such a fucking brat."

Her jaw dropped and she came to a dead stop. "What did you say?!"

Seeing the look of shock on her face actually lightened his mood a bit. "Which word did you not understand?"

"I can't believe you use that kind of language!"

He laughed at her and kept walking. "You may as well get used to it Kooky, it's how ninja talk most of the time."

She had to hurry to catch up to him. "I don't believe you. Ninja would never use that sort of language, it's beneath them."

He smirked at her, clearly amused. It just so happened another ninja was walking past at that moment. Shinzou raised a hand in greeting. "Kento, how is it fucking going?"

Kento returned the wave and offered a friendly smile. "Not bad, how are you fucking doing?"

"All right." Pleasantries exchanged they both continued on their way.

Kushina was stunned. "Does father know you talk like this?"

Shinzou looked over to her and shook his head. "Kooky he's a ninja too."

She crossed her arms and got that muley look on her face. "Tousan would *never* talk that way."

"He would never talk that way around *you* his little girl. He talks that away around other ninja."

She looked at him considering. "So he talks that way to you?"

"Sometimes, he doesn't curse all the time, just when he's feeling a lot of emotion. It's not like when ninja get together every other word is fuck or shit, it's just that we use it sometimes and to us it's no big deal."

She found that interesting. *So that's how dad talks to other ninja.*

---

When the two of them arrived home they ran into father. He gave them a smile and a hug. "Well how was practice today?"

"Fine," Shinzou said.

"Terrible!" Kushina said right on top of him.

Their father chuckled. "Well that seems about right."

"Father could I have a word with you please?" Shinzou asked, his tone serious.

His father nodded. "Of course."

Shinzou glanced down at Kushina. "In private."

Father nodded. "Kushina honey, dinner is almost ready why don't you set the table?"

"Hai father." She watched the two of them go to his study.

---

As soon as the door was shut his father let out a deep sigh. "I can guess what this is about."

Shinzou got straight to the point. "I need more time to train my team. Tomorrow is their last day and they just aren't ready for the field yet. I want to request that the training be extended another two weeks."

"Denied," came the short but firm reply.

"Then give me just one more week, just one." Shinzou pleaded.

"No, I'm sorry son but your orders stand. In two days team four begins active duty."

"Well in that case I request a different mission! The kids are not ready yet."

"Denied."

"But..."

"I am sorry Shinzou, but I have to make my decision based on what is best for the village, not what is best for my family and clan."

Shinzou frowned. "Father my very first mission out of the academy was helping to unload ships. My squad and I did D-ranks for two

whole months before they let us out of the village."

"I remember son, but things are different now. You've been on patrol; you know how bad things are on our western border. And they're getting worse." He paused. "There was a raid yesterday, a big one."

"I hadn't heard. Usually I hear about everything."

"We're trying to keep the news suppressed for now, but I'm sure the rumors will get around soon." His father looked grim.

"Just how bad was it?" Shinzou didn't like his father's look or the fact he was trying to keep things quiet.

"The farming village of Hotuk was burned to the ground and 60 people were killed. When our patrols got there the rock nins ambushed them. We lost nine ninja, the rock nins lost five."

He could see why father wanted to keep this under wraps. For a small village like theirs losing nine was a very big loss. There were only about four hundred nin in the entire village. By comparison the rock nins numbered around four thousand.

"That really is bad," Shinzou agreed. "It's also a big change. Hotuk is eight miles inside the border, the damn rock nins haven't come so far into our territory before. And normally they do their raids and then run. This is the first I've heard of them laying an ambush."

"They are testing us," his father said quietly. "They want to see exactly how strong our defenses are. If they think we're weak they'll start a full scale assault. If we can show them some strength, well that will buy us some time."

Shinzou mulled the words over. "You don't think there's any avoiding it do you?"

His father shook his head. "The best we can do is delay it and give ourselves time to get ready." Father suddenly glanced at the door. In



a rush he hurried over and suddenly opened it.

Kushina pitched forward and fell into her father's study.

Shinzou let out a disgusted grunt. He was upset at Kushina's actions but even more upset that once again he hadn't sensed her.

Kushina jumped to her feet and gave her dad an innocent smile. "Father, dinner is ready." Her father looked down at her and she began to get nervous.

"Are you going to tell me what you were doing Kushina or are you going to try and lie to me?"

She gulped. "I was just curious what was going on father."

"You were spying," Shinzou accused.

"I like to think of it as protective surveillance."

"Kushina," her father said. "When I check up on you *that* is protective surveillance. When you check up on me *that* is spying."

She wrinkled her brow. "What's the difference?"

"The difference is I'm the parent. Now go to your room, no dinner for you tonight."

"Yes father," she turned to go. After training for the graduation test missing one meal was no big deal to her.

"And Kooky," Shinzou called after her. "If you breathe one word of what you heard to your teammates or anyone else we will do circle drills for the *entire practice*. "

She looked back at him fearfully, and then looked up at her father. She had the big puppy dog eyes. "Daddy, would you let him do that to me?"

"Yes."

She suddenly looked horrified.

"He is your sensei Kushina, and he is well within his rights to punish you in whatever manner he sees fit. I will not interfere."

"So keep that big mouth of yours shut." Shinzou told her.

She glared at him. "You're a mean jerk!"

"So you keep telling me."

Furious and defeated she left. They both heard her slam the door to her room shut.

Shinzou turned to his father. "You've spoiled her you know."

His father nodded ruefully. "I know, but she's my precious little girl and I can't help it."

"You're not doing her any favors dad. She has great skills and a good work ethic but her attitude is horrible. She needs to be humbled and she needs to be toughened up too." He changed his voice to sound like a pre-teen girl's. " *That's not fair. That's not fair.* " He shook his head in weary annoyance. "Where she got the idea that a ninja's life was fair I'll never know."

"Well son, that's why I wanted you to be her sensei. An older brother can do things a father can't or won't. I trust you to shape her into a true ninja."

"I will dad." He said quietly. "I will, or events will."

---

His team was surprised when he called a halt to training at 11 and told them they were done for the day. Normally that was when they had a quick lunch before continuing.

"All right team, I am giving you the rest of this day to enjoy yourselves. Tomorrow team four will begin its first mission and we'll be gone for three weeks or more. So have a good rest of the day. I want you to meet me at the docks tomorrow by 10 a.m. on pier nine. Bring all your ninja gear and supplies with you."

"Where are we going?" Daiichi asked excitedly.

"I'll give you all the mission details tomorrow. Now come on let's head back home. I'll see you tomorrow Hideo."

"Goodbye sensei, bye guys." The boy hurried off.

"Come on you two." They had walked about twenty yards when he suddenly stopped. "Oh, wait, I forgot something."

"What sensei?" Daiichi asked.

He looked at his sister and took out the big cloth sack he carried the practice swords in. "Well we can't end practice without circle drills."

Kushina groaned, she'd actually believed he'd forgotten for once.

---

"This feels bulky. I don't like the weight." She complained.

"Deal with it." Shinzou was not sympathetic. "Be glad you get to wear body armor. It may save your life one day."

She was standing in front of the hall mirror staring at the sheets of metal that were strapped on over her chest and back. Her arms, legs, neck, and head were left exposed to give her free movement.

"You know I think I'd rather not use it." She said.

"Not your decision, we all use it." He rapped his own armor that was on beneath his body suit.

"Other ninja in the village don't use it." She pointed out.

"Other ninja in the village don't wear the black and red or carry a katana either. I'll tell you what, you leave your body suit and katana behind and you can leave the armor behind too."

That was not even worth giving a reply to.

She looked at her brother for a moment. "You really do hate me don't you?"

He shook his head. "No Kooky. You annoy the absolute hell out of me at times but I never hate you." He grinned. "Believe it or not I actually love you."

"Then why do you go out of your way to torture me?" She demanded. "I'm way better at the sword than Daiichi, but you never make him do circle drills."

"Kooky, I am hard on you because I want you to be strong. I won't always be there to look out for you. The day will come when you will be on your own. I want you to be strong enough to handle anything that may come at you. And if to do that I have to make you hate me." He shrugged. "That's what an older brother is for."

"So the circle drills *are* just to torture me."

He smiled. "That's just a side benefit. Actually they're to teach you something. Once you figure out what that is we'll be done with them."

"Couldn't you just tell me whatever it is?"

"The lesson wouldn't stick in the same way. And besides," his smile got wider. "It is fun to torture you."

"I hate you."

"I know."

---

At the family dinner that night everyone was talking about her and Daiichi leaving for their first real mission. Kushina enjoyed the attention, especially from her mom and dad. Since she was about to go on her first mission for the village she was especially eager to show everyone she was a real ninja now.

"So I've heard about a big attack on Hotuk the other day." Saishu said.

Her uncle Kaiya nodded. "The damn rock nins are getting worse.

"Don't worry," Kushina said in a clear happy voice. "We'll deal with those fucking rock nins."

Every face suddenly turned to her and all conversation came to an abrupt halt. Everyone was looking at her in shock; her mother had her mouth open and was staring at her in frank horror.

"Kushina said a naughty word!" One of the children at the table shouted out.

Her mom was not a ninja, but Kushina could have sworn she teleported from her seat to a spot right beside her. Without a word her mom grabbed a hold of her long red hair and *yanked* her to her feet.

"Ow! Ow! Ow! Mom that hurts! Ow! Stop!" Kushina pleaded as her mom dragged her to the bathroom.

"Where did you learn such language young lady?" Her mother demanded.

"Urusai told me! He said dad and all the ninja talk like that."

She sent a glare over her shoulder at her oldest. Shinzou tried to shrink down below the table.

"And did he tell you to say that word in this house?" Her mother wanted to know.

"No," Kushina admitted.

"And have you ever heard your father or anyone else use such language in this house?"

"No."

"If you have to use such disgusting language when you are away then I suppose there is nothing I can do about that. But you will *never* use such language in front of me or in this house." She hauled her into the bathroom and shut the door.

Kushina looked up at her angry mother. Her mom began running some water in the sink and took out a bar of soap. "Mom I'm really sorry."

"Yes, but not as sorry as you're going to be. Let me introduce you to an old clan tradition."

---

Everyone at the dinner table listened to the half garbled howls coming from the bathroom.

"Is mom drowning her?" Temjin asked.

His father shook his head. "No, Kushina is having her mouth washed out with soap."

Shinzou stared at him. "You're kidding."

His father shook his head.

About five minutes later the door to the bathroom opened. The mother was drying herself off with a towel and returning to the table with whatever dignity she could muster. About a minute later Kushina stalked out looking like a drowned cat. There were soap bubbles coming out of her nose. She sent her brother a look of pure fury before stalking off to the stairs and her room.

Temjin leaned over to whisper to his older brother. "Someone better not go to sleep tonight."

Shinzou shut his eyes and groaned.

## The first mission

It was five in the morning. More importantly it was payback time. When she made it to his window and looked in she honestly couldn't believe that he was lying in his bed asleep. Using her jutsu she unlocked the window, carefully opened it and silently stepped into her brother's room.

"Don't... even... try."

She looked up, startled to see her brother smirking down at her. He was standing on the wall just above the window, leaning against the ceiling.

"Heh, I was wondering when you would think of this."

The figure in the bed came fully awake at the sound of voices. He tossed aside his blanket and stood before her in a T shirt and boxers smiling down at her. "You know I didn't want to waste the chakra, and sleep isn't as restful when you have a clone active, but I just knew you would try something. So what were you going to do this time?"

She shrugged, no point in denying anything now. "I brought a brush and an ink jar. I was going to put little breasts and nipples on all your shirts."

"I see."

She looked at the clone. "So is that a regular bushin?"

"Mizu bushin actually, it requires more chakra but I wanted him to be able to actually do something if he needed to."

Kushina smiled. "Oh, well that works." And with impressive speed she pulled out a kunai and threw it straight up.



It hit the clone and immediately dispelled it into its base water form. Which of course splashed down completely drenching the both of them and getting most of his room wet.

"Ah!" Shinzou jumped up a bit at the unexpected cold shower. He then looked about to see his bed, rug, and other possessions wet.

Kushina was wet as well of course but she considered it a small price to pay to get back at him. "Gotcha," she said smugly.

---

" **Get back here!!**" Shinzou's scream reverberated though the house.

Both parents immediately came awake in bed. They shared a weary look.

Kushina's father spoke. "Three... two... one..."

The door to their bedroom burst open. "Mom! Urusai is going to kill me!"

It was the start to another day in the Uzumaki main house.

---

Daiichi and his family had a big breakfast. His mom had made his favorite, pancakes, and had spent the whole time fussing and worrying about him. His mother was a beautiful and kind dark haired woman from Grass country. Dad had met her and fallen completely in love. Some of the clan thought Nitsune a little too soft hearted to be in a clan like the Uzumaki. They saw the way she tried to constantly mother and protect Daiichi and they wondered if maybe that was the problem with the boy. But Saishu was completely in love with her and would not hear a word said against her.

Saishu was the younger brother of Naoko (Kushina's father) and like him and like Shinzou was a fifth level blade master. He looked like the typical Uzumaki with fiery red hair, green eyes, and thin powerful

build. Saishu was thought to be a bit more easy going than most and a bit more open minded. He was also intelligent and kind and trusted by both his older brother and the rest of the clan. He was one of the elite Jonin of the village and as such had seen a lot of what was happening on the western border. He was intelligent enough to know what it meant for the future.

"Son, I want you to listen to everything Shinzou has to say to you. He's a great ninja and I know that he'll teach you a lot."

Daiichi nodded. "Yes father."

"Watch out for your teammates. Teamwork is one of the great strengths of ninja life. Always be there when your team needs you, and always do your duty to them and to the village." He leaned in and looked into his sons eyes. "Remember Daiichi, we are the Uzumaki. We are the first into battle. We are the last to retreat. The villagers look to us for courage. Never forget that son. When their eyes are on you, be strong, not just for your sake or the clan's but for theirs."

Daiichi looked into his father's eyes and could see and feel his courage. It was a fire burning for all to see. Kushina and Shinzou had it too, so did uncle Naoko and most of the clan. Daiichi wanted to be like that too.

"Father, I... I want..." he hesitated, not sure how to say what was inside of him.

His father could see it though, the fear, the uncertainty. The weakness. "You're afraid."

The boy cast his eyes down in shame. He flinched a little when he felt his father's arms draw him into a hug.

"It's all right my son; fear is the most natural thing in the world. Being afraid doesn't make you a coward, it only makes you human. You

cannot be brave without being afraid. It's all right; when the time comes you'll do what you have to, even if you are afraid."

Daiichi looked at his father nervously. "How can you be sure dad?"

His father laughed and rubbed the top of his head messing up his hair. "Because you're my son and you're an Uzumaki."

---

Daiichi waited by the gate. He had on his armor, sword, and other equipment. His backpack was lying on the ground. As soon as he saw Shinzou and Kushina exit the main house he slung it onto his back. He could see by the way Shinzou was looking at her that Kushina was in trouble *again*. Not that you could tell from looking at her. She seemed to be in high spirits as she practically sprinted over to him. He wasn't going to ask, she would be bragging to him soon enough.

"Morning Daiichi," Kushina sang out. "You ready to see the world and do an actual mission?"

Daiichi smiled and tried to sound confident. "I sure am I can't wait." He turned at Shinzou's approach. "Good morning sensei."

"Good morning Daiichi, lets get going, the sooner we board ship the sooner we can begin practice."

"Practice?!" Kushina rounded on him. "But we're going to be on a boat!"

Shinzou grinned at her. Along with his equipment and back pack he also had the cloth sack with the practice swords slung over one shoulder. "True, and we won't be able to get near as much done as we would normally. But we'll definitely be able to work on a few things, like circle drills."

Daiichi could see Kushina's good mood evaporate like water on a hot plate. He knew that meant the two of them would be going at it

until Kushina was ready to drop.

---

On pier nine lay a large wooden schooner called the, 'Princess Bell.' She had two large masts with eight sails rigged to them. She was not exactly new as she'd been built over a hundred years ago. She had no engine, no generators, no equipment more modern than a compass, could move only as fast as the wind could push her, and was unable to take on large cargos like a modern freighter could.

But precisely because she did not need coal or oil she was cheaper to operate. She could still transport cargo or passengers easily enough and made her owners a profit. Outdated or not she would not be going anywhere soon. On board her sailors were working to get her ready to leave with the high tide.

On the dock Shinzou gathered his team around him. When they'd arrived they'd found Hideo waiting and eager.

"All right team, it's time for me to give you the mission specifics."

"Where are we going?" Hideo asked.

"We are going to the land of Waves." Shinzou informed them.

That got an immediate reaction as all three of them buzzed. They had all learned geography and knew that land was a long way off.

"What is our mission exactly?" Kushina wanted to know.

Shinzou frowned, he was not happy about the mission. But happy or not he and the team would have to try and carry it out. "Since all the fighting has started there has been a big upswing in banditry and crime. Most of the villages just don't have ninja to spare anymore for paid missions. Since we're one of the few ninja villages not currently at war we're still accepting them. There's a large bandit force operating in the forest of Wave country. We've accepted a contract to deal with them."

"Deal with them how sensei?" Daiichi asked.

Kushina giggled excitedly. "How do you think we deal with bandits?" She playfully slashed a forefinger across her throat.

"We're going to *kill*? " Daiichi's voice cracked a bit on that last word.

Shinzou didn't like either of their reactions. Daiichi seemed far too nervous at the prospect of killing. While Kushina was acting as if all this would be fun. Hideo actually had the right attitude. He was simply listening and taking everything in seriously.

"Daiichi, a sword is but a tool with a single purpose. What is that purpose?"

"To kill, sensei."

Shinzou nodded. "You have been taught that since the day your father began teaching you the sword. You had to know that the day would come when you would have to kill." He turned to Kushina. "We are not going on a vacation and what we are going to do will not be fun. It is work, the sort of work you have all been trained for. We are ninja and killing is our profession. I expect each of you to behave with that in mind."

Daiichi looked anxious. "Uh, sensei, is it normal to have to kill on your very first mission?"

Shinzou sighed and slowly shook his head. "No it's not, but things have changed recently." He looked about to make sure no one was close enough to overhear and lowered his voice. "All of you know about the fighting that's been going on along our western border right?"

All three nodded.

"And all of you have heard about all the fighting that's going on in almost every land?"

Again all three of them nodded.

"So what does that have to do with us?" Hideo asked.

"People are saying that all this fighting is turning into a third great ninja war. If it does there's no way we'll be able to stay out of it. The damn rock nins won't let us. That means that sooner or later we have to expect we'll be at war with Earth country."

Hideo and Daiichi both looked worried at the prospect, but of course Kushina grinned.

"Good," she said. "We can finally teach those damn rock nins a lesson."

"Those damn rock nins outnumber us ten to one." Shinzou said quietly. "Fighting a war with them is not something to look forward to. If we do go to war with them we won't be fighting for victory, we'll be fighting for survival."

Kushina clearly didn't like the sound of that. "No way! We'll crush them if we fight!"

Shinzou gave her a blank look. "And you know that due of your vast experience fighting rock nins?" That comment shut her down nicely. "Take it from someone who has actually fought them, they're a dangerous and powerful enemy and not to be taken lightly."

"So what is the village doing to get ready?" Hideo asked.

"Well to start with we're keeping all our best units in country for patrol and defense. The stronger our defenses the longer the earth nins will wait before they turn these raids into a real war."

"Maybe they won't," Daiichi suggested hopefully. "Maybe we'll be so strong they'll decide to leave us alone."

"Maybe," Shinzou admitted. "But that's not the way to bet. They've already spent a lot of lives with these raids and probes. Too many to

just turn away without anything to show for it. We have to expect them to come in force sooner or later, but for us the later the better. That's why our strongest units are staying here and why we've been tasked with this mission."

"I still don't understand sensei." Hideo said.

"War requires two things above all else; soldiers and money." Shinzou explained. "We already have every available soldier under arms. But our treasury is almost empty. We need *money* we need to build up a war chest as fast as we can to help us pay for everything we'll need. That is why we are taking a B-rank mission. Even though it would normally not be assigned to a Genin team desperate times call for desperate measures. We're going out to bring our country the money it needs to fight and survive. Even though we'll be a thousand miles away we'll be fighting to protect our country just as if we were on the western border. Do you understand?"

All three of them nodded.

"We won't fail the village." Kushina said firmly.

Shinzou nodded himself. "I don't doubt that for a second, now come on it's time to board ship."

---

About twenty minutes later the Princess Bell began to pull away from the dock. It was beginning the week long journey to wave country.

To where team four would enjoy its initiation into combat and blood.

## The work of ninja

After seven uneventful days the Princess Bell approached the coast of Wave country. Daiichi was easily the happiest to spot land. Though they had not been in any storms, and not been in any especially rough seas Daiichi had, had a rough time. Even with land within sight he still looked a bit green around the gills. Shinzou prayed the boy was never aboard a ship going through a winter gale.

They docked at the port of Bunkyo. As they went down the gang plank his students looked all around. Even more amazing that the strange wooden buildings or odd store fronts were all the trees that lined the streets here.

"Do most other countries have so many trees?" Hideo asked.

"It depends," Shinzou informed him. "Leaf has some huge forests. Mist and Cloud have plenty of forest as well. Wind country though is pretty barren."

"It's hot," Kushina complained. "It's just the start of summer but it's already so hot."

Shinzou chuckled. "It's hot for where we come from. Down in wind country the days can be over a hundred degrees for most of the year, and the night are cold enough to freeze to death. You can go hundreds of miles and never see anything green."

Hideo and Kushina stared at him. What he described sounded like hell on earth.

"Why would anyone want to live in a place like that?" Hideo asked.

"To be honest I have no idea." Shinzou noted that while two of his students seemed excited to be on foreign soil the third was hanging back. "You feeling all right Daiichi?"



The young Genin suddenly focused and gave his sensei a weary grin. "Just fine sensei."

Shinzou nodded, though he didn't believe it for a second. He didn't show it, but he was really starting to wonder about him.

On the dock they were greeted by a young man who led them down to city hall.

---

Lord Fenchu was a minor nobleman and governor of this province of Wave. Like most of the local nobility he was richer in honors and title than he was in money.

"We are a poor country," he explained. "And cannot afford to pay vast sums. I hope you understand."

Shinzou frowned. "Well I can appreciate that, but we haven't come here to work for free. If you want our services you have to pay for them. I was under the impression you had contracted for a B-rank mission. If that's not the case we'll be catching the next ship for home. We are ninja, not charity workers."

"I was told we would have some room to negotiate the sum." Lord Fenchu pointed out.

Shinzou really wanted to groan. Under more normal circumstances the village would *never* send them out on a mission without a set amount already agreed to. This was just further proof of how desperate Whirlpool was for money. "What do you offer?"

"How about five thousand?"

Shinzou turned to his team. "All right team let's go, we're heading back to Whirlpool."

"Wait a moment!"

Shinzou rounded on the man. "I don't like being insulted; I wouldn't kill your cat for that much!"

The man took a step back and frowned nervously. "You cannot expect me to pay top ryu for your services." He pointedly looked at the three kids.

"My team is young," Shinzou admitted. "But make no mistake, they are ninja and they are professionals in the art of violence. And to set your mind at ease, I happen to be an ANBU captain in my home country."

Fenchu seemed to carefully consider that. "I could double my offer to ten thousand."

Shinzou gave the man a frosty smile. "That's fine," Fenchu smiled. "If you want me to kill a cat. But if you want us to kill armed men you will have to do better than that."

"And just what do you think would be fair?"

"How many bandits are we up against?"

"We estimate there are at least fifty of them," Fenchu answered. "They have become a real problem and are growing worse."

"We will settle your problem for you, but you must pay what it is worth."

Lord Fenchu paused and thought for a moment. "Would you be willing to work on bounties?"

"Perhaps, it depends on how much the bounties are."

"We will pay 500 ryu for each head." Fenchu said.

Shinzou thought about it. If there really were 50 bandits that would mean 25,000 ryu for eliminating all of them. It was not really that

much, but it was enough for a low end B-rank. "Include a flat fee of 5,000 and you have a bargain."

Lord Fenchu slowly nodded. "Done."

---

A pair of men rode their horses slowly into the thick woods. They were laughing and joking and obviously in a good mood. Summer was just beginning and it looked to be a good year. The local authorities were much too weak to deal with them; the whole countryside seemed ripe for the picking. It was good to be the biggest dogs around.

Neither man suspected that as they headed back to camp there were wolves watching.

---

The bandit camp was located in a small clearing in the woods near a fast running river. The camp was mostly made up of tents with a couple of thatch huts. The horses were kept in a roped off coral. There was no fence, no watch tower, and no order to the camp. The tents were all placed at random with a few men practicing their weapons while most just seemed to lie about relaxing in the warm sun. There did not seem to be any sort of guard, it was obvious these men did not expect anyone to be troubling them.

---

From five hundred yards away Shinzou and his team watched them. They were all well hidden in a thicket of branches. Shinzou had his binoculars and was looking things over especially carefully. After several minutes he took away the binoculars and made his judgment.

"Sloppy," he said. "Even for bandits they're sloppy."

Seeing a real enemy for the first time Kushina was quivering with excitement. She was eager to begin the work of ninja for which she

had been trained all her life. She kept putting her hand on the handle to her katana. "What do we do now?" She asked fervently.

"We rest."

"What?" she hissed. "We finally find them after three days of looking and we're not attacking them?"

He gave her a sharp look that put her back on her heels. Since boarding ship he had been in full sensei mode and she had known better than to fool around. "We've come here to kill them and that's exactly what we'll do. But not right now."

"When then?" She asked.

Shinzou glanced at his watch. "In about ten hours, when it's four in the morning."

"Why should we wait?" Kushina demanded.

"I'm sorry Kooky; do you have somewhere more important to be?" She blushed a little in embarrassment. "We'll do this when the human body is at its weakest. With any luck at all there won't even be a fight; it'll be like killing sheep."

The disappointment on Kushina's face was easy to read. She'd been eager for *combat*, a real chance to use her sword. The relief on Daiichi's face was just as easy to see.

Shinzou preformed some hand signs. " **Mizu Bushin no Jutsu.**" From a few nearby puddles a perfect water clone formed. "My clone will keep an eye on things while we rest."

---

They pitched a temporary camp about half a mile away. They had a meal of raw fish and rice, Shinzou would not permit a campfire. As soon as it started getting dark he ordered his three students to get some sleep. He was used to long hours and would remain awake.

Kushina didn't want to go to sleep. "I don't think I can," she admitted. Her hand drifted to her sword again. "I'm too excited."

Shinzou nodded. "I know, but even if you can't sleep lie down and try to get some rest. I know it's impossible, but try not to be so eager for it to come. Hell, don't even want it to come, just be ready when it does."

Kushina looked at her old brother carefully. This was of course the first time she had ever seen him on an actual mission. "You really aren't excited are you?"

He shook his head. "This is our work Kushina, our trade and vocation. We should always try to behave like professionals, like a fisherman at sea or a carpenter in his shop." He chuckled a bit. "It isn't always possible; there is no feeling in the world like fighting for your life." He looked at his little sister intently. "You'll understand that very soon, but get some sleep now."

She nodded, for some reason she had a feeling like butterflies in her stomach.

As she'd expected she lay down on her sleeping bag and couldn't sleep. She tried to rest as the hours slowly crawled by. It was just after 3:45 when her brother poked his head into her tent. She sat up awake and alert. Her brother was not surprised.

"All right Kooky, it's time."

---

Swiftly and silently the four ninja returned to their original spot. There Shinzou had a quick conversation with his water clone. Even though they were five hundred yards from the camp they still whispered to each other. When they were done Shinzou dismissed his clone, letting it dissolve into water. He turned to his team and spoke again in whispers.

"It looks like there's only one guard. I'll deal with him, then we'll proceed just as planned. Since there's a half moon out we should have plenty of light. From this point on no talking, we'll use hand signs only." He took a moment to look at each of his three students. Kushina was practically bouncing, Daiichi looked pale and nervous. Hideo looked calm and almost ready. He had just the tiniest twitch in his fingers. Eagerness? Fear? A little of both?

"I know this is the first time any of you have ever had to do this, but I know I can trust each of you to do your duty. You have been trained for this your entire lives, and you are ready. Now, be swift, be certain, and remember; we are ninja of the whirlpool." Three silent nods answered him.

Shinzou pointed to Hideo and made a pair of signs. "*Take position.*" Hideo gave the sign for affirmative and moved. Shinzou looked at the other two. "*Follow. Silent.*" The two of them each made the affirmative hand gesture and followed their sensei towards the enemy camp.

---

They came to a halt at the edge of the tree line just before the clearing. Shinzou turned to them and gestured. "*Wait.*" Then he was gone.

From their spot Daiichi and Kushina looked off to the right where a single figure stood. The man was just standing there half asleep. As they watched he yawned and scratched his belly. Obviously oblivious to what was coming.

Shinzou appeared just a few feet behind the man. In a blur they saw one hand slap down across the man's mouth while the other viciously slashed across his throat. In the moonlight they could see the blood as it spurted up into the air, it looked almost black. The man struggled even though he was already dead. His hands flailed about and he tried to run. Shinzou held on tight. After only about ten seconds the movement stopped. Shinzou slowly and carefully set the body down on the ground.

It had been a perfect kill.

Shinzou signaled and they leapt down to his side. He pointed to the nearest tent. "*Kill. Fast. Silent.*"

"*Affirmative,*" Kushina signaled. She pulled out her katana.

"*Affirmative,*" Daiichi signaled. He pulled out his.

Together the three of them entered the tent. On the floor were four men sleeping peacefully. They each moved to stand over a different target, katanas at the ready. Shinzou made a gesture with one hand. "*Now.*"

Shinzou's blade fell and there was a soft, 'thunk' of meat and bone being chopped.

Kushina drove her blade down as hard as she could. The sword sliced clean through the neck, into the sleeping bag, and down to the earth beneath. The sudden gush of blood caught her by surprise. She nearly gasped at the sudden feel of the warm liquid as some of it splashed up to her face.

Daiichi's hands were shaking just the tiniest bit and his heart was pounding like a drum. He stared down at the sleeping man and was afraid, he was afraid that he would not be able to do it. At his sensei's signal he saw both of them bring their swords down while he hesitated. *Just do it!!* He screamed to himself. He shut his eyes and drove his blade down.

"AAAAARRRRRR!" A blood curdling scream pierced the night.

Daiichi opened his eyes and saw to his horror he had somehow completely missed the neck, and instead had chopped off the man's arm at the shoulder. He froze not knowing what to do. He stood there and watched as a sword sliced down in front of his face, mercifully ending the screams.

But the damage was done.

The fourth man in the tent was awake and screaming bloody murder. Shinzou yanked his sword out of Daiichi's target and with a smooth backhanded swing cut the man's head off. Outside the tent they could hear confused shouts coming from all over the camp.

"So much for surprise," Shinzou said. "You two stay close to me and watch each other's backs." Stepping over the decapitated body he rushed out of the tent while Kushina and Daiichi followed.

Out of the tents men stumbled out in confusion. Most of them were not dressed but had a sword or some other weapon in hand. Some of them went down immediately with an arrow in their chest.

The bandits knew they were under attack but had no plan, no organization. Shinzou took advantage of that. He slammed his sword into the ground just long enough to free his hands for a jutsu. Out of the nearby river ten water clones rose and joined in. Shinzou deliberately ordered them to strike from different directions and to shout as they did so to help spread even more confusion and panic. The clones also helped add to the body count. Though they could be dispelled with a mere scratch the enemy did not know that and so tried to fight them rather than try and just toss some knives at them instead. That was a mistake.

---

As she followed her brother one man came straight at her wielding a large iron mace. She didn't think, she just acted. The man was able to get one swing at her; she was fast enough to easily duck beneath it. She came up and snapped her sword up and out in a picture perfect jab. The man had no armor or shirt on so she got to see the tip of her blade slip clean into his ribs. Unlike before there was only a finger of blood. Unlike before the man's eyes were open. He looked at her with shock and with a sudden fear. For a long moment the two of them were locked into each other. Kushina couldn't bring herself to look away. She saw the life go out of the man's eyes as he



crumbled and fell at her feet. For a second she stared at him, but snapped out of it and returned to the fighting.

---

A man with long brown hair was crying out as he ran forward with a huge broadsword held over his head. For a second Daiichi hesitated. He was scared. No, not scared, he was terrified and had pissed himself. For that second his feet were trapped as he was trying to decide whether to flee or fight. But then through his panic his training kicked in. He was no blade master like Kushina, but he was an Uzumaki and knew how to use a sword. The bandit brought his broadsword straight down as though chopping wood. The attack had been simple and ugly and easy for a trained swordsman to dodge. Daiichi stepped quickly to the side. His opponent had left himself completely vulnerable. This time he kept his eyes open as he swung. His blade cut deep into the man's neck, he gurgled something and clutched his bleeding throat as he collapsed. Daiichi stared down at his handiwork for just a second and then got back to the fight.

He had just killed.

---

The bandits only advantage had been one of numbers, and with their general confusion it had been wasted. With surprise and their greater skill Shinzou's team was able to triumph. Seeing the inevitable the last few bandits threw down their weapons and cried out for mercy.

As his students watched Shinzou cut them down. The fact they were begging for quarter made no difference to him at all. After only fifteen minutes of fighting it was all done. And team four had succeeded in their mission.

The four of them had just done the work of ninja.

## Red flags

With the fight over her heartbeat slowed down. She stood there in the middle of the camp, her sword still in her hand. She looked at her katana. In the moon light it looked black, it was coated in blood. She saw there was blood on her hands as well. She looked about and saw the bodies, saw death in so many twisted forms. Her brother had done most of it, but she had done some as well. Her eyes were drawn to a man still gripping a short sword even though his neck had been cut open.

She had done that.

She bent over and emptied her stomach. She moaned as she fought to not vomit a second time.

She felt her brother place his hand on the back of her head. "Take it easy, slow deep breaths."

She couldn't seem to talk so she just concentrated on breathing and not throwing up again. When she could speak she kept her eyes on the puddle of vomit at her feet. "Are you going to make fun of me now?"

"Of course not."

She was so surprised by his answer she actually looked up at him. "Really?"

He gave her a serious nod. "There's nothing to make fun of Kooky. You know what it's like to kill now, to take a human life. That knowledge *should* affect you. I'd be worried if it didn't. But now you truly know what it is to be ninja."

"Does it ever get easier?"

He nodded slowly. "It does, it's like anything else, the more you do it the more you get used to it. You will learn how to shut off your heart when you need to."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll learn not to feel anything while you're in combat, it's the only way to do this and stay sane."

She looked at him fearfully. "I don't know if I can." She looked back at the man she had killed.

He could see where her attention was. He gently took her chin and drew her eyes back on to him. "You can and you will, I'll help and so will dad if you want. We all do this Kooky, it's the only way to do what you have to and remain a good person." He looked about the camp. "All right, you just relax. I need to find your teammate."

---

When Shinzou found him Daiichi was on the edge of the camp near the river. The boy was sitting, his knees held close to his chest. He was rocking back and forth. When Shinzou approached him the boy looked up, his face was covered in tears.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry..."

The boy cut off as Shinzou put a hand on his shoulder. Daiichi flinched as though afraid. Shinzou saw all of this as well as the piss stains soaking his pants. As a sensei he understood that this reaction was something more than simple shock at the reality of killing. Kushina was in shock. But what was happening to Daiichi was much worse. The boy was still afraid. Fear was a good thing for a ninja. Fear made you cautious, fear kept you from overestimating yourself or underestimating your foe. Fear drove you to work hard and never be complacent. Yes, fear was a good thing for a ninja.

In small quantities.

You had to learn to pay attention to the fear, but control it. There was no place for cowards in the ranks of ninja.

"It's all right Daiichi, it's over now."

"Sensei I'm so sorry for what I did!"

"I know, it's all right, what's done is done."

The boy was still shaking. "I know I messed up horribly, I killed three men, but that doesn't make up for my mistake."

"You did the best you could Daiichi, and you fulfilled your mission."

"Are you going to tell my father about this?" His sensei hesitated.  
"Please don't! I want him to be proud of me!"

"He will be Daiichi, I guarantee it. This was a very hard first mission. You carried out my orders and fought well, even if mistakes were made."

"Then please don't tell my father about how I messed up." Daiichi pleaded.

But Shinzou shook his head. "I'm sorry Daiichi, but I'll have to include what happened in the mission report, and I'm sure your father will ask and I won't lie to him about it."

The poor boy looked absolutely miserable.

Shinzou leaned down and tried to calm him. "It'll be all right, your father will understand I'm sure. Now why don't you take a quick swim and then rejoin me and your teammates?"

"A swim?" The boy asked in confusion.

"It will wash out the piss." The boy broke eye contact and looked away in shame. "It's all right, I won't tell anyone about it. This is

something that won't go in the report and I promise I won't mention it."

The boy looked back gratefully and then quickly jumped into the water.

---

Hideo was staring at a half naked man with two arrows in his chest.

"You did good work Hideo." Shinzou informed him.

"Thank you sensei," the boy said quietly.

"Not like shooting targets is it?"

"I've hunted," Hideo said. "I've killed with my bow before, lots of times."

"Yes, but this isn't the same as killing a deer." Shinzou pulled his katana back out.

"Sensei, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to chop his head off." Shinzou said matter of factly.

"Why?"

"Because we receive a bounty for each head we bring back." He noticed Hideo turning his head. "Don't look away. If you've hunted, I assume you've cut up your kill."

"This is different."

Shinzou nodded. "That's why I don't want you to look away. If you're going to kill a man you should understand what it means." He brought his sword down in a single clean motion.

Hideo watched and said nothing.

---

"You all did what I asked of you and I am pleased with all of you." He had reassembled his team in the middle of the camp.

"What happened with all the shouting? What went wrong?" Hideo asked.

Daiichi opened his mouth but Kushina answered first. "It was just bad luck, one of them must have heard us and he woke up." She sent her cousin a quick look. "Isn't that right Daiichi?"

Daiichi looked surprised, but quickly nodded.

Kushina looked pleased until Shinzou spoke. "The screaming began because Daiichi missed his strike and wounded one of them instead of killing him."

Kushina gaped at her older brother. "Why would you tell him that?"

"Because it's the truth, and teammates shouldn't lie to one another." He didn't let her argue. "The fighting is done but we still have work to do. You three go through this camp and search for anything worth taking, money, jewelry, weapons or anything that might be valuable."

"We're robbing the dead?" Kushina said.

"It's called taking spoils," Shinzou replied. "And we all do it. It's one more part of being ninja. Now you three get busy, I'll take care of the bodies."

---

Through the early morning darkness the three Genin went through the tents and huts slowly and deliberately tearing the camp apart. As they did so Shinzou searched the bodies. He began making two piles, one of heads and one of corpses.

By the time it began getting light the three young ninja had finished their work and were standing together watching as their sensei sorted through all the money and objects they had given him.

As they relaxed Hideo turned to Daiichi. "So I've been wanting to ask you, just how the hell did you miss killing your guy?"

Daiichi looked down. "I had my eyes closed." He mumbled.

"You had your eyes closed?" Hideo said not believing it. "What kind of weak ninja are you?"

"Hey!" Kushina barked. "Don't insult my cousin."

Hideo frowned. "Why don't you let him answer?"

"Why don't you just leave him alone?" Kushina asked.

"Because as long as we're on the same team everything he does affects me." Hideo answered. "I might die some day because he's too weak to do something."

"My cousin's not weak, and if you don't shut your mouth right now..."

"You'll what?" Hideo took a step forward. He was a few inches taller than Kushina and tried to look imposing. "What will you do?"

Smiling she took a step forward herself and went face to face with him. "I'll kick your sorry ass. You're not a hundred yards away right now."

"You know I am starting to get really sick of you always covering for him." He turned to Daiichi. "Why don't you stand up for yourself for a change? Instead of having her do it for you?"

Daiichi looked miserable. "I'm sorry." He said.

Hideo shook his head. "I don't want you to apologize; I want you to get stronger."

Daiichi would have told him that he tried. That he didn't understand why he couldn't get stronger, or why his fears seemed so debilitating.

But Kushina jumped in and began yelling at Hideo, who started yelling back.

---

Shinzou looked up from the money. Hideo and Kushina were really yelling at each other. The pups were barking at one another. He actually thought that a good sign. Both of them had killed and gotten over their initial shock. Hideo was a bit more distant than he would have liked, but he was still very much a part of the team. Kushina seemed to have completely regained her normal temper.

It was Daiichi he was worried about. The boy was timid and he didn't know how to change that.

He shouted. "All right you three, get over here now." His three students put their argument on hold and quickly ran up to him. Around him he had assorted piles of money, jewelry, weapons, and equipment. "This actually went really well, we'll probably get more from spoils than we will from our payment. All right, now to start there was about 22,000 ryu in cash. We divide that up just like we do the mission payment. Fifty percent to the village, twenty percent to me, and ten percent to each of you."

"Why do you get so much?" Kushina demanded.

"Kushina," Hideo said. "He did most of the work."

Shinzou smiled. "And why should a Jonin sensei make as much as a Genin?"

Kushina crossed her arms. "It doesn't seem fair."

"It will seem much fairer when and if you become a Jonin. Now here," he handed her a stack of notes. "That's 2,200 ryu, your share of the cash." He handed the boys similar stacks.

"Shopping money," Kushina said excitedly. People in Whirlpool naturally considered the Uzumaki to be rich. They were most



certainly well off, but even the head family did not have huge amounts of money. This was the most money Kushina had ever had her hands on.

"Now, as for the jewelry, each of you can pick any one item; the rest goes to the village. As for the weapons and armor you are free to take as much as you like."

The pile of jewelry wasn't that big, but it had some interesting items. Kushina immediately knew what she wanted. She pulled out a pearl necklace and quickly put it away in a pouch. Hideo took a small jade carving of a cat. Daiichi declined to take anything. Shinzou waited for his students to pick and then selected a ring with a small diamond on it.

As for the equipment none of the Uzumaki's were interested, their equipment was of the best quality and provided for free through their clan. Hideo and his parents had to pay for his gear and so he went over to take a look. The bandits had, had a wide variety of weapons ranging from spears to swords to clubs to a diverse number of knives and daggers. There were also a number of leather jerkins and shirts of chain mail. Some of the weapons were made of wood, most were iron, and a few were good quality steel. Hideo was disappointed that there were no bows or arrows. He ended up taking a leather jerkin he though would fit him if he cut it down a bit. He also took about a dozen knives and a short sword made of iron.

Seeing that Kushina grinned. "Don't tell me you actually want to learn the sword."

Hideo just shrugged. "It might come in handy."

With the spoils now dealt with Shinzou took out a pair of scrolls. He was no seal master but was good enough to work the basics. He placed all the remaining cash, jewels, and equipment into one seal. With that done he walked over to where fifty two heads were neatly gathered, they soon disappeared into his second scroll.

Shinzou eyed the horses that were peacefully still in their corral. He would have loved to have sold them, but the rule about spoils was that they were only what you could carry with you. Governor Fenchu could not complain about jewelry and cash, but he would certainly raise hell about trying to sell the horses. They would bring the horses with them and hand them over to the authorities, at least that would make the governor happy.

"All right team, just one more thing to do and we can get going. Gather together all the wood and cloth around here and pile in up by the bodies. We'll make a funeral pyre before we go."

"Why bother?" Hideo asked. "They're just bandits."

"That's true, and if we had another mission we would just go. When time is short you take care of your own dead and leave the enemy to the crows. But when you do have the time you should always tidy up the battlefield. Take care of all the dead, yours and theirs."

---

It was another hour before they were finally ready to leave. They set the pyre alight and then began herding the horses towards Bunkyo. There were no prayers spoken for the dead. They were the enemy, you might respect them, but you did not mourn them.

---

Two days later they returned to the port town.

Fenchu was indeed pleased to know the bandits were all dealt with and to have the horses handed over to him. The heads were counted and per their agreement Shinzou received a total payment of 31,000 ryu. Kushina was very excited to receive another 3,100 ryu in cash.

Shinzou arranged passage on a coal steamer back to Whirlpool that would be leaving in six days. He arranged their quarters and then carried out some standing orders. He got busy using the village's share to buy all the medical supplies he could.

While they waited for the ship they did some light training. Kushina got to do circle drills while Hideo learned the basics of using a sword. Daiichi stumbled through his workouts seeming to lose focus much of the time.

They were also allowed to explore and go shopping. It was a small city in a backwater little country. But Kushina was delighted to learn they had at least one thing that her home village did not.

Walking into a candy store her eyes spotted it instantly. "Is that double mint fudge?" She said excitedly.

The woman behind the counter nodded. "It's rather expensive though, thirty ryu per box."

Kushina pulled out a fistful of cash. "I'll take as much as you have in the store including whatever's in back."

She left the store weighed down by ten boxes of her beloved cookies. She raced back to her room with a huge smile and a determination not to let her brother find out.

---

Finally the day Daiichi had been dreading came. They were forced to go back on a ship. The five day trip was over seas that were calm and peaceful. Unfortunately Daiichi's tender stomach didn't seem to realize that. It was a very long trip for the poor boy.

---

Early in the afternoon of the fifth day they came into sight of Whirlpool. They were all very happy to finally spot home again (especially Daiichi.) As the ship drew closer to shore the details of the village began to become clear. Shinzou noticed something and took out his binoculars to make sure.

"Oh kami," he spoke as he put down his binoculars.

His students were all on deck with him and were worried when his happy mood seemed to evaporate.

"What's wrong?" Kushina asked.

In reply he handed her his binoculars. "Look at the dock flags."

She did so. The dock flags were huge flags set on three hundred foot tall poles. They were meant to warn both ships and the public when there was dangerous weather. There were only two colors flown, green and red. Kushina could see the red flags clearly.

"I don't understand," she handed the binoculars back. She looked up at the clear blue sky. She'd seen the red flags before. They usually only came out in the winter time when a winter gale was coming. "Is there a storm coming?"

"The storm's been coming for awhile now, I think it's arrived." Shinzou spoke almost mournfully. He saw the worried looks on his students' faces. "Maybe I'm wrong, we'll find out when we dock." He refused to say anything more. There was no point in scaring them if he was wrong somehow.

But he wasn't wrong.

When the freighter docked there was a man waiting for him on the pier. He was an old man, at least into his sixties. He had on a tin badge in the form of a shield. He was a part of the Guard. The Guard was made up of ninja and regular soldiers who always remained in the village. They were the ones to act as a police force, to guard the wall, inspect incoming and outgoing ships, and in wartime they were the last line of defense. Normally they didn't bother to wear anything more than a badge and their usual clothing. Seeing a guardsman waiting for him wearing chain mail he knew.

The guardsman immediately approached him. "You are captain Uzumaki Shinzou." It was not a question.

"I am."

The guardsman gave him a quick bow and handed him a sealed envelope. "I have orders for you and your team."

Shinzou took the envelope and tore it open. Reading it, it was as he expected. "Damn it," he muttered. He looked fiercely at the guardsman. "When did they cross and in what numbers?"

"They crossed the border early this morning, estimates are anywhere from five hundred to eight hundred."

Shinzou sucked in his breath and turned to his students. "It has finally come, the damn rock nins are done with raids. We are at war." He held out the sheet of paper. "And we have orders."

## The tragic end of Team Four

Shinzou looked at the orders again before looking back at his team. Kushina was eager, Hideo seemed calm, and Daiichi looked nervous. *They're not ready for this, nowhere near.* But whatever he thought he had orders signed by his own father.

"All right team four, listen and listen well. We are at war with the rock nins, they're on our soil and we're going to drive them out. The village needs *every* available ninja for this, and that includes us. Our orders are to go directly to the front and join in battle."

"Great!" Kushina said. "We'll teach those damn rock nins not to mess with us!"

"Of course we will," Shinzou said. He did not allow any of his own doubts or worries show through. He turned to the guard. "How far is the front?"

"About fifteen miles due west from the village, there have also been a number of enemy squads infiltrating behind the line."

"They're all ready that close?" Shinzou couldn't keep his worry completely from his voice. "Did they come through the Spine?" The Spine was a long valley that crossed the border between Earth and Whirlpool.

The guard shook his head though. "They came over the border in the open country south of the Spine."

Shinzou mulled that over. It was good and bad news. The enemy would have a lot more room to maneuver and launch flank attacks. On the other hand the terrain was a lot hillier with only a few roads, there were plenty of good spots for ambushes and for defensive stands. As he thought about all this he took out a pair of scrolls and handed them to the guard.

"Please have these sent to headquarters. One is a mission report; the other contains the remaining money and spoils from our mission. Also please see that the medical supplies on the ship are unloaded and sent to the hospital on priority." He turned to his students. "All right, we're going into a war zone. The rock nins will be a thousand times tougher than those bandits were. Stay close to me and stay alert the second we go out the gate. There have been enemy penetrations which means we can run into them at any time. Most importantly, whatever I say you do," he looked directly at Kushina. "No arguments and no hesitations or you'll end up dead. Do you understand?"

All three of his students nodded.

He wanted to give the kids a chance to go home and at least check in with their families. But the orders had been specific; they had to get to the front immediately. Shinzou tried not to think how bad the situation had to be to require such haste from a Genin squad.

"Check to make sure you have your equipment, food, water, and medical supplies." They all did a quick check and found everything was set. "All right then, follow me."

---

Whirlpool village had two gates. One leading westward towards earth country, and one that led eastwards towards waterfall country. The people had long ago taken to calling the western gate the war gate and the eastern one the trade gate. Now it truly was the war gate. Fifty men and women of the Guard stood a careful watch over it. They looked nervously into the empty grasslands beyond for any sign of movement. When team four approached one of the great wooden doors was opened just enough to let them slip through one at a time. The moment they were through the gate shut and was bolted down.

The four of them ran out towards the horizon and battle.

---

As they moved Shinzou had the lead while his three students followed him in a loose triangle. Shinzou had warned all of them to keep a sharp eye out, but moving as fast as they were there was only so much they could hope to spot.

"Those stupid damn rock nins are going to be sorry they ever decided to mess with us." Kushina said. "We'll slaughter every one of them!"

"It sounds like you plan to kill most of them yourself." Hideo teased.

She grinned at him. "Don't worry; I'll leave a few for you and Daiichi."

Daiichi gave a weak grin and tried to joke. "That's o.k.; you can have my share if you want."

Hideo looked over at him. "You know your cousin or sensei may not be around to save you. You're going to have to take care of yourself."

Daiichi just nodded at that.

"Don't worry about Daiichi," Kushina said. "Worry about yourself. I mean you do know that the first rock nins you see might not be a hundred yards away right?"

"I'm not the one on this team that needs protection." Hideo said.

"Shut up baka." Kushina barked. "I've told you before to leave my cousin alone."

"And I've told you that as long as we're on the same team how he does affects me, with a war on that's only more true."

"If you keep talking the rock nins won't be the ones you need to worry about."

Shinzou snapped his head around to shout at them "Knock it off you two! Now is not the time for this! We need to be a strong team." He



turned back around just in time to spot the trip wire. His momentum carried him into it even as he tried to leap. "Scatter!!" he screamed.

All four of them got into the air just as the ground under their feet exploded.

---

The four of them came down hard but generally unhurt. That was when the three rock nins came out of hiding.

---

Shinzou rolled quickly and easily back up to his feet. He spotted one of the rock nins closing on him. All he could do for his team was shout a warning; he would have to kill his opponent before he could help any of them. His katana was out and ready.

His opponent cast a jutsu. " **Iwa Bushin no Jutsu.**" Out of the ground two earth clones formed. Earth clones were slightly more difficult to deal with as they required more damage to dispel while having more punch to their attacks.

Shinzou knew what to do. He stabbed the ground with his sword to free his hands and cast a jutsu of his own. " **Mizu Bushin no Jutsu.**" The land of Whirlpool was always damp. Even without an obvious source like a stream or pool there was plenty of water in the ground. Six clones quickly formed to attack the two rock clones while the original grabbed his sword and hurried on to his opponent.

His enemy recognized the black and red and knew he had to be Uzumaki. The man clearly had no wish to fight in close. He quickly back pedaled and tried another jutsu. " **Floor of Stalagmites Technique.**"

All around him small columns about four feet high of pointed stone began to erupt out of the ground. All the clones, rock and water, were pin cushioned and dispelled. Shinzou barely managed to dance around them and avoid being stabbed. Using chakra he was able to

stick his feet onto the side of two of them as he worked another jutsu of his own. " **Mizu Hebi no Jutsu.**"

This was a scaled down version of the better know water dragon jutsu. Again using the water underneath the ground he sent a dozen small, 'snakes' flying out of the earth from behind his opponent. The rock nin immediately leapt and was able to avoid all but two of them. The small water jutsu did him no direct harm, merely knocking him off balance and causing him to fall.

Face first into his own spikes. He was speared though chest, belly and legs. he screamed and squirmed like a worm on the hook. He would live for a few more minutes but was no longer a threat. Shinzou hurried to help his students.

---

She landed roughly but got back to her feet and pulled out her katana. She looked up to see a rock nin smiling at her. "Looks like I get to kill a baby Uzumaki." He ran though some hand signs. " **Quicksand Technique.**" He slammed a hand onto the ground. Instantly the earth in front of him transformed into a goopy sand.

Kushina immediately felt herself being pulled down. She tried to leap away only to find she was already knee deep and sinking fast. With her quick mind she ran through her available jutsus, it was a short list. But she thought one of her new ones might do the trick. She was waist deep she went through the hand signs. " **Mizu Kangoku no Jutsu.**"

Water surged all around her as she found herself within her own water prison. The quicksand was washed away and she ceased to sink.

"That won't save you!" The rock nin angrily began a new jutsu, but didn't get to finish it.

A katana slammed into his back and up and into his heart. He barely had the time to gasp before falling in a bloody heap.

Shinzou yanked his sword out. "You all right Kooky?"

She dispelled her jutsu and came out wet, but other wise fine. "I'm all right."

With a swift nod Shinzou hurried to deal with the last enemy.

---

Daiichi was slow to get back up after his rough landing. He didn't quite understand what had happened. He looked up, and saw death coming. What he saw was an angry Iwa nin with a kunai in his hand and murder in his eyes coming for him.

And in that awful moment of realization his body began to shake. He froze like a rabbit caught in the wolf's eyes. He couldn't make himself move. He couldn't stand or even draw his sword, all he could do was shake and stare at what was coming.

And as he watched a pair of arrows streaked in at the rock nin. The first caught him in the left shoulder, the second would have hit his chest but he managed to just dodge it. The Iwa nin did not cry out in pain or make any sound at all; he just changed his focus and his direction.

"Daiichi get up!" Hideo screamed at him as he pulled back on a third arrow.

The shout did it, or perhaps it was that death was no longer coming straight for him. Daiichi was able to stand and draw his weapon.

But he was too late.

He could only watch as the Iwa nin closed the distance between him and Hideo. As calm as though on the practice range Hideo drew back and released his third arrow. As he did so his opponent was within ten feet of him. The arrow was aimed at his opponent's neck, but instead struck the left forearm that had been raised to try and block. Hideo dropped his beloved bow and tried to pull out his short

sword, but never had a chance. The rock nin's kunai struck clean and deep into the twelve year olds soft throat. With one savage motion he cut it wide open. Hideo's blood squirted into the air and he grabbed at his throat as he fell.

Hardly seeming to even notice the boy's death the rock nin turned and came back towards Daiichi. *I'm going to die*, he thought. Despite his fear he set himself and brought the sword into the ready position. He hoped he had enough courage to at least put up a decent fight. The rock nin was obviously wounded with an arrow sticking out of his left shoulder and arm. The wounds however did not seem to slow him down in the least. And unlike Daiichi the rock nin seemed to have no fear at all. He came straight in aiming for the throat. Daiichi snapped his sword out and danced to the right. His katana acted as a fair deterrent and kept the rock nin from getting right in close. But he simply circled about trying to find an opening.

Daiichi was still sure he was going to die. He might hold death off for a bit, but it could only be temporary. One slip and his throat would be sliced wide open like poor Hideo's. He somehow survived a couple more swipes and was desperately trying to keep his distance when the rock nin turned away from him.

He then stood there as a mere spectator as his sensei attacked the rock nin while screaming furiously. To Daiichi the rock nin had seemed as fast as death, but against his sensei he looked like nothing at all. Daiichi watched as Shinzou chopped off the hand holding the kunai, then chopped off the other hand, and chopped off both legs at the knee. The rock nin had taken two arrows without making a sound, but how he howled. Shinzou spat on him and kicked him, but he refused to end things.

Shinzou quickly came to him. "You all right?" The words were cold.

Daiichi could only nod.

"I see there's no blood on your sword. Do make sure to wet your blade before you put it back." The words were deliberately mocking

and he could see it in his sensei's eyes. Shame. Shinzou was ashamed of him. Daiichi lowered his eyes and drew the sword across his palm. It was a clan tradition that a sword drawn for battle had to taste blood before it could be put back in a scabbard. Daiichi looked back up to try and explain, but Shinzou was no longer there.

---

"Hideo," Kushina knelt down by his side. She didn't know any medical jutsus, and even if she did she knew there was nothing she could have done. He was still alive; she could hear the breath rasping in and out of him. Both his bloody hands were still on top of his ruined throat. She placed her hands over his and let his cover them. "I'm so sorry for everything I said."

He managed to turn his head just a little bit and his eyes seemed to focus on her. He couldn't talk, but he managed a small grin and nodded his head just a bit. She took that as a sign of forgiveness.

"Thank you," she said humbly. Then as she watched the breathing stopped and the eyes glazed over. He was dead.

---

By the time Shinzou joined Kushina it was over. Shinzou's only consolation was that at least Hideo had gone quickly. (Unlike his killer who was still crying in agony.) He called over Daiichi. "Take a good long look," he said to both of them. "You've seen death, but the death of a comrade is different. You worked together, ate together, you knew his dreams and what he liked and disliked. He was a friend and a comrade, and now he's gone forever. Take a good long look, because if you remain ninja you'll see this again over and over. It is part of the price we pay as ninja to see people we know and care about die right in front of us."

The three of them all looked down at his body. Kushina and Daiichi had known him for four years in the academy. They had not been close back then, but they had still known him. And in the time since graduation they had become teammates. They didn't always get

along but they had grown close even through the occasional argument.

Shinzou had only met the boy on the day he became his sensei. He had been his student and his responsibility, it had been his duty to protect him and help him grow strong. And now he was dead.

"I'm sorry," a heart broken Daiichi wept.

Shinzou looked at him and said simply. "I know you are Daiichi," he reached down and gently closed Hideo's eyes. "I know you are."

---

Shinzou led them in speaking a few prayers. He then took out Hideo's poncho and wrapped the body in it. He pulled out a piece of paper and pen and quickly wrote something out. He then handed the paper to Daiichi.

"Daiichi, I'm assigning you a mission. "You're to take Hideo's body back to the village for proper burial. Once that's done report to Guard headquarters and give them this paper. We only made it out seven miles, if you go back the exact way we came it should be safe."

"I don't understand." Daiichi said.

Shinzou stood and looked down at the boy with a blank mask. He spoke in a completely neutral voice. "Daiichi, what I'm going to tell you right now is going to hurt like hell. Sometimes the truth can be cruel and hurtful, but it's still better than me giving you a lot of empty bull shit. I say this in front of Kushina because she has a right to hear it, not because she is family, but because she is your teammate and has fought at your side." Shinzou took a deep breath. "You're a coward."

Daiichi stumble back a couple steps as though he'd been physically struck. "Sensei... I... I try."

Shinzou nodded. "I know that, I can see you struggle and try to be brave. But for whatever reason you don't seem able to overcome your fears. You froze; you weren't able to draw your sword for much too long. If you came up to the battlefield you'd be dead inside an hour. It would be sheer murder if I let you go forward. What's more, if you were to hesitate you might put Kushina or someone else in danger, I can't allow that."

The boy looked down ashamed. "It's my fault what happened to Hideo isn't it?"

"No, that wasn't your fault. Even if you had acted immediately either you, Hideo, or both of you might have been killed. If anyone bears responsibility it is me. Don't blame yourself for this because I don't." He squatted down and spoke with a bit more warmth. "I don't think you can be a front line ninja, but you can still help the village by serving in the Guard. You may lack guts but you are honest, hard working, and devoted, those are all excellent traits and you can provide excellent service in the Guard. And you will still be considered a ninja; serving in the Guard is no disgrace."

Daiichi knew that was technically true. Service in the Guard was considered honorable and they did have an important role to play. But they were also seen as a sort of dumping ground for those ninja not strong enough for regular duty. The Guard was where ninja who were too old or injured went. It was where academy students who failed the graduation test were sent. It was where those who were too weak, for whatever reason, for field service were sent. "What about the orders?" Daiichi asked.

"I am your sensei, in certain situations, like this one, I can override the orders of the Council or the Headsman." He stood back up again. "Now you need to get going. Kushina and I are going to continue on to the front."

Daiichi nodded, there seemed to be nothing for him to say. He carefully picked up Hideo's body and began back the way they had come.

---

"Did you really have to be so cruel?!" Kushina demanded once they were alone.

"Letting him go forward would have been a hell of a lot crueler. Would you rather I'd said nothing and instead he ended up dead? Because that's what would have happened. He's a good kid, but he's not fit for this."

Kushina looked away. "I can't believe Hideo's gone."

"Neither can I, but it's done and we still need to get going."

Kushina glared at her older brother and sensei. "Can't you grieve for him?"

"Not right now I can't, we've got a mission to take care of. This is another hard truth about being ninja, the mission comes first. I grieved for a few minutes and did what I could. If I survive the next few days I will go to his parents and apologize to them for my failure to protect their son. I will never forget his face or stop wondering what I could have done to save him. But for right now, I have to put all that aside and concentrate on getting us into the battle."

"You're heartless, you know that?"

Shinzou nodded. "There are times when a ninja has to be. Consider that just one more lesson. Now let's go."

And despite the tragedy they moved towards the much greater tragedy playing out on the battlefield.



## Lose once

**Author's Note:** Sorry that it's been so long, and before anyone says it I know this chapter is a bit short. As most of you probably know I have been busy with two other more popular stories. But I don't ever leave my stories unfinished. I won't give you a time frame but I will **try** and update more often.

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Shinzou ran forward and stopped, crouching low. His black and red body suite was torn in several places and smeared in blood. (Most of it was not his own.) Glancing at the horizon he could see the red sun just hanging above it. There was a little less than an hour of sunlight left. He and his little sister had been running around the battle field fighting nonstop since their first bloody encounter with the rock nins. The hilly terrain and ravines had prevented the rock nins from effectively concentrating their numbers. Instead they had come on in a vast front maybe ten miles wide. They were obviously hoping to take advantage of their numbers by forcing their small enemy to also spread out to try and contain them.

Maybe the damn rock nins had actually had some organization when all this started, but from what he could tell things had grown more and more confused as the day passed. This battle had degenerated into a thousand small encounters between the forces of Earth and Whirlpool. It was nothing but one endless series of ambush and surprise attack. Fortunately since this was their home territory, their knowledge of the terrain had helped them offset the rock nin advantage in numbers. As Shinzou was thinking this the ground in front of him shifted and a human figure leapt up at him.

"Damn!" Shinzou tried to roll away but it was too late. A rock nin in a dark brown flak jacket had stabbed him through the abdomen about where his kidney was. But rather than cry out in pain Shinzou smiled. "Gotcha." His body dissolved into water.

"Damn!" Now it was the rock nin's turn to curse and try to leap away.

But just as with the mizu bushin it was too late. From a thatch of tall grass the real Shinzou leapt out, his bloody katana already out. One quick slash of his blade and his enemy's head fell from his body even as the rest of him was still leaping.

"Tenzen!" Another rock nin howled and he too leapt out of the earth. He ran towards Shinzou, his hands forming signs.

" **Wire Animation Technique.**" A girl's voice spoke as she hid behind some more of the tall grass. A piece of ordinary copper wire slithered through the tall grass like a snake. It wrapped around the ninja's feet and easily tripped him, ruining his attempt at a jutsu. In a flash Kushina ran out of her hiding spot and drove the tip of her own katana into the man's unguarded neck.

As soon as that was done she and Shinzou came together and stood back to back, swords ready and eyes darting about for any possible threat.

After a moment Shinzou spoke in a tired voice. "I think it was just those two."

"I think you're right," Kushina sounded just as weary. This had been their seventh encounter with the enemy. The largest group they'd run into had been only three. Though they both believed they were now clear of enemies neither of them relaxed or lowered their swords.

"I'm just about out of chakra," Shinzou admitted quietly. "I don't think I'll be able to make another clone until I've had some time to recover. What about you?"

"I still have plenty of chakra," Kushina frowned. "Of course that's only because I don't know any jutsus that are really useful."

"If we both live through this I'll start teaching you the mizu bushin," Shinzou told her.

"That's great, it would be better if you could have taught it to me before."

"There wasn't time," he said. "Now let's see what's on the other side of this hill."

She nodded. Shinzou moved quickly but carefully up the side of the small hill, he bent his back and tried to stay as low to the ground as he could. Kushina moved in the same way staying about ten feet behind so that she could watch his back. As he neared the hill's crest he dropped to the ground and began to *slowly* crawl forward. His main concern was to be as imperceptible as possible. When he got to the top he pulled out his binoculars and scanned the ground in front of them.

"What do you see?" Kushina whispered to him. She was crouched down in the tall grass below the crest.

"I see the same thing I've been seeing all day, lots of dead bodies," he told her grimly.

"Mostly our or theirs?" She had figured out by now that if there were more than a handful there would be some from both sides.

He did a quick count. "Fifteen of theirs and seven of ours." That matched what they'd seen throughout.

"We're really killing them at a two to one rate aren't we?" Kushina sounded proud.

"Looks that way," Shinzou sounded worried.

"We'll definitely win then."

"Well I certainly hope so."

Kushina looked at her brother in surprise. "How can you have any doubts?"

"Two reasons," Shinzou told her calmly. "One, even if we are killing twice as many of them as they're killing of us you need to remember they outnumber us *ten to one*. If they're really committed and ready to pay the price they can destroy us no matter what we do." He saw his little sister's look of fear. "But I don't *think* they will. They'd have to sacrifice close to a thousand ninja just to take out little country. I don't *think* they're ready to make that bargain, especially not since they're at war with Leaf and a bunch of others. Taking Konoha would be worth that sort of sacrifice, but not Whirlpool."

"I never thought I'd be so happy that our country is small and poor."

"Anything can be an advantage under the right circumstances."

"So what's the other reason?" Kushina asked.

"It's a very big battlefield and we can only see a very small part of it. The damn rock nins only need to breakthrough at one place to reach the village." He told her grimly. "And if they do that it's over."

"No way!" Kushina said fiercely. "The outer wall is strong and we'll definitely stop them there."

Shinzou slowly shook his head. "The outer wall is strong, no doubt. Against a regular army it would definitely stop them and force them to try and put the village under siege. But against a force of rock nins and their damn earth jutsus? The wall won't last five minutes. That's why father sent every able bodied ninja into the field, even the new squads like us. We have to stop them before they reach the wall. That's the difference when a great power fights a small one. They can lose a dozen times and they'll survive just fine. If we lose once, we lose everything."

"What do we do if they get that far?"

"We run back to the village and die fighting." He answered easily.

She could only nod. *I really hope they don't reach the wall then; I'd hate to die without even getting my first kiss.*

---

Uzumaki Naoko Village Headsman of Whirlpool, Clan head of the Uzumaki, and war leader of his country stood on top of a hill just five miles from the village. He was calmly wiping his katana. Gathered all around him were fifty of his village's strongest ninja. They were the strategic reserve he'd held back to deal with any emergency, they were the last line of defense. Before him was a field covered in dead bodies, the vast majority of them rock nins. It had been a very close thing; he'd led his men from the front with several more Uzumaki right beside him. The cost had been high, but they'd won. A handful of enemy survivors were running for their lives.

"You did it," Saishu said exultantly. He didn't even seem to feel the pain from his wounded shoulder. "You've won the battle."

"The battle's not over yet," Naoko reminded him. "Our people are still out there fighting."

Saishu grinned at him. "The fighting's not done, but we've still won. This was their ultimate effort and we stopped it."

"That's probably true for today, but the war has only begun." Naoko reminded his brother. "Don't think the damn rock nins are giving up. I'm sure they were hoping to take us by surprise and win the whole thing today, but that doesn't mean they're going to just give up."

"No one ever said it would be easy," Saishu looked over to one of the bodies. The body was dressed in black and red, Uzumaki Miru had made the ultimate sacrifice to guard the village. His name would go on the wall. For a moment he worried about his son. They'd gotten word that Daiichi and his team had arrived and gone to fight. They'd heard nothing else. Given the chaos of the day's fighting that could mean anything. *I pray you and the others are all right Daiichi.* Though he worried as any father would he did not show it any more than Naoko did. They had to do whatever was best for the village;

they would worry about their children when the situation permitted. "The sun is going down. If you want to send out a general message to all the troops you'll need to do it soon."

The Headsman nodded. "Send three gulls out over the line."

Saishu nodded. "I'll see to it myself."

Uzumaki Naoko put the now clean blade into its sheath and looked out at the horizon. All three of his children were out there somewhere. He spoke a silent prayer to kami asking that he see them all again.

---

Shinzou glanced into the sky. High above them he spotted three seagulls flying far beyond bow range or the range of any but the most powerful jutsus. They were white gulls with black wings. "Well, it looks like we won, or at least survived which is the same thing."

"What do you mean?" Kushina could see the gulls too. "They're messenger birds but they're not delivering a message it looks like."

"Yes they are," Shinzou told her. "They're just not landing or using a slip of paper. Just the sight of those birds has a special meaning during battle."

"They do? No one ever told me."

"Sorry, just one more thing there wasn't time for. Three birds flying above the battlefield means, 'hold in place.' Basically this is a way for father to tell the whole army at once that he wants us to stay where we are for the night. Four birds would mean, 'advance forward' while two birds would mean, 'retreat to the village.' A single bird would just be a messenger bird."

"So since we're not being told to retreat it means we won right?" Kushina said happily.

"It means we survived at any rate."

---

Ten miles west of where Shinzou and Kushina were a different messenger bird was delivering a different message.

"What does it say?" Ryozo asked.

Removing the slip of paper the ninja read the news and grimaced. There was no need to get a code book, the message had been scrawled in plain language.

"From the look on your face I take it the news is not good." Ryozo commented.

The other ninja looked at him. "I am afraid it's not general, the strike force was defeated. They were able to slip through as you had planned but met a large force of enemy nin about five miles from the target."

"I see," Ryozo looked eastward and frowned. He had come here in command of this army wanting to earn everlasting glory as, 'the conqueror of Whirlpool.' He still planned to earn that title, but it would not come today. "Well, it would have been best if we could have done in the opening assault, but there's more than one way to knock down a wall. Send out messengers to tell our men to disengage and pull back, it's time to build something of our own."

"Yes general."

"It's going to be a long war," Ryozo said with certainty. "We only have to reach their walls once, and we'll have them."

As the sun left the sky he continued to look east into the growing darkness. He could still see it in his mind's eye; the walls torn down, the village in flames, and every last enemy ninja dead.

Especially those damned Uzumaki.





## A blonde ninja from Konoha

Before the sun was in the sky Kushina and Shinzou were up. They had a breakfast of one rations bar each with some dirty stream water to help wash it down. Together they began to carefully scout the ground in front of them. Fortunately the only rock nins they came across were corpses that were beginning to stink with rot. Before too long they were joined by some mother very wary whirlpool ninja. Shinzou recognized them and after carefully confirming they were who they seemed they joined up. By the time the sun was completely up above the horizon they had come into contact with still more comrades. The enemy however remained nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe they've given up and run away," Kushina said hopefully.

Shinzou looked at her and shook his head. "There's no way they'd give up that easily." The other ninja all agreed.

They continued to advance westward into their own territory, the lands that the rock nins had overrun the day before. Despite not finding any opposition the advance was slow and careful. Every ninja kept a nervous eye out for possible traps or ambushes. This kept up all morning as the forces of Whirlpool advanced without opposition; they had advanced roughly about ten miles.

The a little after noon one of the scouts called a halt, he had spotted something.

---

On a hill top Uzumaki Naoko brought his binoculars up to his eyes. The distant structure came into sudden sharp focus.

"To think they could build that in one night," Saishu muttered angrily. "Damn rock nins with their damn earth jutsus."

"There's a reason they're considered the best at building and tearing things down. Everyone says the buildings in Iwa are the most amazing in all the world." Naoko said.

"Let the bastards go back to Iwa and build to their heart's content. That damn thing is on **our** land!" Saishu said angrily.

"I'm sure if you asked them they'd say it was their land now." Naoko replied. What he saw in the distance was a fortress. It was made entirely of the sandstone that was common locally. The design was fairly simple; it was a rectangle with sides perhaps five thousand and two thousand yards long and about fifty yards high. At each corner was a round tower about another fifty yards higher than the rest. There were no gates that he could see; the enemy seemed to simply rely on the ability to chakra walk up and down the sides. That would make supplying the garrison difficult, but not impossible. All along the walls and on the top of the towers rock nins could be seen moving about. At the moment there was no way to see what the structures inside the wall might look like. He brought his binoculars down and sighed. "How many other fortresses have they built?"

"Five," Saishu answered immediately. "But those are all much smaller versions of this one. They probably only have garrisons on twenty to thirty at most. This is obviously going to be their main base."

"What it really is, is dagger aimed at our village. It's only twenty miles away, much too close. There's no way in hell we can make peace with Iwa as long as it's there."

"Well of course not," Saishu agreed. "We'll never agree to peace so long as they're on even an inch of our territory."

Naoko lowered his binoculars and looked about to see there was no one too close. He turned to his brother and spoke in a whisper. "We may have to give up some territory to make peace, but not this much."

Saishu looked as though he'd been wounded again. "Are you serious? You're actually talking about giving up land to them after our victory yesterday?"

"How many dead have we lost?" Naoko asked him.

"Sixty confirmed dead," Saishu made a face as he spoke that number.

"How many wounded and missing?"

"Twenty three missing and eighty wounded." By wounded they meant those who had been taken off the field and returned to the village for treatment. The walking wounded like Saishu didn't count so long as they could still fight.

"We'll lose some of them as well," Naoko predicted gloomily. "That's a total of one hundred and sixty three. We began with only four hundred and ten names on the active rosters. We've already lost more than a **third** of our strength after just one day's fighting."

"They've lost more than we have," Saishu pointed out.

"They still have thousands of ninja available in reserve. We have no reserves at all, unless you want to count the people in the Guard or untrained academy students." Naoko shook his head. "Whether we like it or not we may have to cede some land over to them if that's the only way to make peace. But I won't make peace with them if it means leaving their armies dug in and this close to our village."

"You start to feed a rabid wolf you only give him more of an appetite," Saishu pointed out.

"If it's a choice between feeding him and not feeding him I agree, but if it's a choice of feeding him or letting him eat you, that's a different matter." Naoko shook his head. "Anyway talk of peace is going to have to wait. That fortress is proof that this war isn't going to end anytime soon."

---

From one of the towers Ryozo looked eastward at the series of nearby hills. There was scattered movement all along those hills; it all seemed a bit unorganized.

"They look like ants," Ryozo commented.

"They're a little tougher than ants, Ryozo-sama." A gruff voice said from behind him.

Ryozo turned to look at the tall ninja. He was six and a half feet and looked like he was carved from solid granite. A long scar ran down the front of his face including over his right eye which was covered with an eye patch.

"Fair enough, I doubt ants could kill close to a hundred and fifty of our men. But even with wounded and missing I still have more than six hundred ninja available."

"Not enough," the large ninja shook his head stolidly. "At least not to take them all at once. We would have better luck fighting a battle of attrition; we can launch raids and small attacks and wear them down."

"That will wear us down as well Aono," Ryozo pointed out.

"We won't take Whirlpool without paying the price for it." Aono said. "Man for man they're about as good as we are, but they just don't have our numbers. Chip at the biggest mountain long enough and eventually you'll wear it down to nothing."

Ryozo nodded. "Not the most glorious way to win a war, or the quickest, but it's effective. I leave the details to you."

Aono nodded and left him. Ryozo looked back out over the hills crawling with enemy ninja. They really did seem like ants to him. Such an enemy would surely never stop him.

---

Kushina was looking through a pair of binoculars and muttering furiously beneath her breath.

"When are we going to attack that thing?"

"Maybe in a hundred years." Shinzou told her.

She looked at her brother angrily. "What do you mean? It looks like the whole army is here; we should attack and slaughter them! How dare they build that on our land?"

"They dare because they're strong enough to," Shinzou took his binoculars back from her. "Whether we like it or not there's nothing we can do about it for the moment."

"What are you talking about?!" she demanded. "We slaughtered them yesterday! We should attack them and finish the job!"

"We beat them because we knew the terrain and they didn't. We were able to surprise them and ambush them time and again. We were also able to use our water jutsus to good effect because the land is so wet. None of that would be true if we were to try and assault that place. You can bet they put plenty of defensive jutsus into their walls. There isn't enough water on hand to try and flood them out and I doubt we'd be able to flatten their walls easily. Storming a fortress like that with hundreds of defenders would just get all of us killed."

"So what are we supposed to do? Nothing? Are we going to just let them stay on our land smiling down at us?"

"Yes," her brother answered calmly. "At least for now. Maybe later on we'll be able to do something, but for right now taking that fortress is beyond our power."

"We can't just let them hold out land like this! We have to push them out!"

"I agree with you Kooky, but what we have to do and what we can do are two very different things right now." As he was speaking a ninja approached the group he was in and came to him?"

"Are you Captain Uzumaki Shinzou?" He asked.

"I am."

"I have orders for you and your team." He held out a folded and sealed piece of paper.

Taking it he broke the seal and read the orders silently.

"So are we going to attack them?" Kushina asked eagerly.

"No," Shinzou told her. "All first year teams are being ordered back to the village."

---

When they'd come in through the gate the people had cheered them, that had been nice. When they made it back home to the Uzumaki estate the entire family (except for the ninja still at the front) came out to greet them. Mother was crying and insisted on making a huge scene. They learned that their brother Temjin was all right. Kushina had looked around for Daiichi, but apparently he was working in the Guard. When she asked about her cousin the family looked a little embarrassed, especially aunt Nitsune Daiichi's mom. No one would come right out and say it, but they were clearly embarrassed that Daiichi had been shuffled off to the Guard. She did notice that no one, not even aunt Nitsune, seemed to think it a bad decision.

"Why did father send us back here?" Kushina asked when she and her brother were alone.

"He must have decided the emergency is over for now. The war isn't going to be over any time soon so he must think all the new ninja should be pulled out and given more training before going permanently to the front. Remember, all of you were rushed into

service sooner than he wanted. Since he has enough ninja to hold the front he must figure it's safe enough to pull the rookies out."

"I'm not a rookie anymore," she said proudly. "I'm a war veteran."

"That's true," he frowned at her. "You're a twelve year old war veteran with no useful jutsus. Now do you really want to go back right now, or wait a few months to learn some new jutsus and all the other things there wasn't time to teach you? I promise the war will still be going on, unless we get overrun before then."

"You're really cheerful, you know that?"

Shinzou chuckled. "At least one of us has to be a realist."

---

Father, uncle Saishu, and the other ninja in the clan did not return. They remained on station and on active duty. When Daiichi trudged home he did not try to find her or her brother.

The next day the bells tolled. The city held a memorial service to honor all those who had already fallen. Dressed in black Kushina and the rest of her clan joined the other villagers as they brought flowers to a section of the wall. There sixty three names had been carved to join hundreds of others. The names were carved below a simple tribute cut higher in the stone.

### **They died so others might live.**

Among the new names was Uzumaki Miru. Kushina's eyes drifted to another name that had gone up as well.

Karama Hideo.

Seeing his name on the wall brought it all back to her. How brutally and quickly he had died. She was only twelve but she had already seen, and caused, a lot of death. Looking at Hideo's name she couldn't help but wonder if one day hers would go up there as well.

---

For the next two weeks life fell back into a routine. Shinzou would spend all day training her and trying to kill her with circle drills. No new team members were assigned so Kushina got one hundred percent of her brother's attention. That was both a good and bad thing. It was good in that she was learning a lot of useful things. He had already taught her the Mizu Bushin no Jutsu and was showing her a couple attack jutsus. The bad part was that he rode her even more mercilessly than he had before. Sometimes she really thought going to the front would be safer than enduring any more of his circle drills.

Heading home from another exhausting session the two of them were surprised to find a wild buzz running through the Uzumaki estate. Kushina grabbed one of her many cousins to find out what was going on.

"The Hokage from Konoha has sent us tow of his ninja to talk to father. They say they're on a diplomatic mission and want to negotiate an alliance!"

"Wow!" She turned to her brother. "Isn't that great? The leaf nins want to become our allies! Maybe they'll send us a whole bunch of ninja to help us."

"Maybe," Shinzou said cautiously. "Since we're both fighting Earth country we're already allies in fact if not by treaty. Konoha is already fighting in Grass and Wind countries, I'm not sure how many ninja they have to spare."

"Well any help would be good right?"

Shinzou had to nod at that. "Well that's true," he looked at their cousin. "Where are these two leaf nins now?"

"They're inside the main house. They're going to stay here while they're in whirlpool."



Kushina grabbed her brother's hand. "Come on I want to meet them!"

"Fine, but try not to embarrass yourself."

She stuck her tongue out at him.

---

Inside the main house most of the clan had the two visitors under siege. Fortunately her mom spotted them and waved them over. Sure enough standing right next to her mom were two strangers with leaf hitai-ites. One had white spiky hair and red lines drawn in beneath his eyes, the other was a simply beautiful individual with blonde hair.

Her mom introduced them. "I would like you to meet my son Shinzou and my daughter Kushina, they both helped to fight off the original attack. Children this is Jiraiya and..."

"Wow you're pretty!" Kushina suddenly said unable to contain herself. Shinzou and her mom looked a little embarrassed by her outburst. Fortunately their guest merely laughed.

"Well thank you."

"So what's your name?"

The blonde ninja from Konoha smiled at her and answered.

"My name is Tsunade."

# Prank

A message had been sent out informing Naoko that two representatives of the Hokage had come to speak to him. He in turn had sent a message back that he would return sometime the following morning. That evening Jiraiya and Tsunade got to enjoy dinner in the Uzumaki main house with the entire clan (minus those at the front.) Per request Kushina had been allowed to sit next to Tsunade, the two of them had taken an immediate liking to one another. Jiraiya got to sit between a couple lovely Uzumaki girls who were eager to hear about the great toad warrior. As they ate Tsunade asked if it was normal for the entire clan to have a meal together or if this was a special occasion. She was surprised to hear that the clan came together every evening to share dinner. She was even more surprised to hear that while there was a main family there was no sense of separation or distinction within the clan. Any member of the clan could say anything to the clan head without fear.

Jiraiya laughed when he heard that. "Can you imagine Hyuuga Hirzo doing that? Letting anyone in his clan speak their mind?"

Tsunade laughed as well. "I think he'd die of shock if anyone even tried it."

Kushina looked curiously at her new friend. "What do you mean by that Tsunade-chan? Aren't all clans like this?"

Tsunade smiled down at the cute little twelve year old war veteran. "Not at all, though it would be good if they were. Some of the clans back home like the Nara or the Akimichi or the Inuzuka are a lot like yours, they really consider themselves to be a single large family. But there are also clans like the Hyuuga who make distinctions and treat each other like masters and servants. There's no real love between the two branches of the family, and often there's outright hate."

Kushina stared at her; she literally could not imagine a clan acting like that. "I wouldn't want to be in a clan like that!"

Tsunade chuckled. "Neither would I."

---

The next morning, as was his habit, Shinzou woke up about five minutes before his alarm was set to ring. Yawning and three quarters awake he headed towards his bathroom to take a shower and begin the day. He turned the bathroom light on and passed by the mirror heading for the shower.

He froze.

He came suddenly and completely awake. Staring at the image of his own face he saw the word, 'BAKA' spelled out backwards and in black ink across his face and cheeks.

---

"YOU ARE SO DEAD KOOKY!!" Shinzou's cry of fury reverberated through the entire house.

Tsunade and Jiraiya both awoke and opened their doors in time to see a twelve year old red head racing past with a furious seventeen year old right behind her giving off unbelievable killer intent. They saw her burst through a door at the end of the hall. "Mom! He's going to kill me!" They heard her shrill cry.

Tsunade looked over at Jiraiya. She was in a robe given to her by their host; he meanwhile had on only boxers. For just a fraction of a second she let herself admire her teammate's rippled and hard body. The softness and weight that would come with age was nowhere to be seen. For just that fraction of a second Tsunade wondered if anything might have ever happened between them if she had not met Dan. But as soon as the thought came she dismissed it, he'd had his chances. But he was too much of a womanizer and a lecher for her to be with.

"I'm not sure if I should laugh or be worried," Tsunade said.

Jiraiya chuckled. "I'm sure it's just a family squabble."

"He's right, Kushina and Shinzou are always fighting," a young red headed girl dressed in nothing but Jiraiya's shirt said as she appeared behind him.

"That's true," a second girl, this one wearing his jacket said. "This is pretty normal for them."

Tsunade glared at her teammates as he grinned back weakly. They were guests of the Uzumaki and here he was bedding two of its members! *This is why we never got together!*

"I can explain," Jiraiya began. "You see..."

"Shut up you disgusting man whore!" She slammed her door, almost tearing it off the hinges.

The two girls looked at Jiraiya. "She isn't your lover is she?" One of them asked.

He smiled. "Why yes, yes she is." He put an arm around both of them and shut the door with his foot. "Now let's try and make her even more jealous!"

The two girls giggled.

---

Naoko looked at his daughter, just looked. She almost jumped. When he'd arrived home this morning he'd found his son locked in his room refusing to come out in public until he'd gotten Kushina's handiworks removed. From past experience they both knew it would be an all day process. He'd found his daughter sitting quietly in his study with her usual air of sorrow and apparent repentance. He'd spotted two of his nieces sneaking out of a bedroom window. All this *before* even meeting the Hokage's representatives.

He had spoken to his two nieces, not as clan head or even village headman, but as an uncle. He'd quickly gotten a confession out of both of them as to just what had happened. Though angry he had decided to just let them go without informing their parents. It wouldn't help things with Konoha if part of his clan declared a vendetta against one of its ninja.

He had decided to just leave Shinzou be. There was no need to humiliate him any further in front of the leaf nins.

As for Kushina...

When he entered his study she came to stand at rigid attention. He looked at her for a moment and then spoke in a calm and quiet voice. "Remove your katana and sheath."

"Wh... what?" She asked taken by surprise.

"Remove your katana and sheath," he repeated calmly. "And give them to me."

Hesitantly, she took her katana from off her back and gave it to her father.

"Now go back to your room and change out of your bodysuit, from this moment on you are forbidden to wear the red and black."

"What! You can't do that! I'm an Uzumaki ninja! It's my right..."

"It is not a right," he told her coldly. "It is a privilege. Your katana and your clan dress mark you as an Uzumaki. What you do when you bear them reflects back on the clan. If you insist on behaving so shamefully, and in front of guests, then I cannot and will not allow you to shame the clan as well."

"But that's not fair!" Kushina said angrily.

"Fair, fair, fair, life is not fair Kushina!" Despite his best efforts a little of his frustration slipped through. "How can you still have this

childish idea that life is somehow meant to be fair? Life owes you nothing Kushina; we deal with things as they are not as we would like them to be. If the world were fair we wouldn't have damn rock nins swarming through our country. Now go upstairs and change, along with everything else I will require you to apologize to our guests for waking them this morning."

She wanted to argue with him, wanted to scream at him that it wasn't right she be treated like this because of a prank. But the look on his face warned her that any resistance would be a bad idea. Before she went though there was one thing she had to know. "How long will I be punished?"

That was when her father said something that turned things from bad to worse to unbelievably soul wrenchingly bad.

"That will be your sensei's decision."

---

Orange. Not just any shade of orange either. But bright, damn near blinding, orange. The kind of color that did not call for attention but jumped up and down shouting for it while waving its arms. It happened to be her favorite color and she had a surprising number of items in her closet. Black and dark red were ideal colors for a ninja; they blended and disappeared into most backgrounds. Since she wasn't allowed to wear the clan bodysuit she had decided to go to the other extreme and highlight out wrong it was for her not to be dressed in her usual gear. What hurt even more was strapping on her old sword. Having her katana taken from her was like having a part of her soul torn away.

Neither her father nor their guests commented on her appearance. Though Jiraiya did snicker a little. She stood rigidly in front of them and then gave them a deep and respectful bow. "Please accept my most sincere apology for disturbing you this morning. My behavior was childish and completely inappropriate. Please do not judge my clan or village by my own disgraceful actions."

Jiraiya laughed a bit. "Don't worry about it, I was already awake anyway."

Naoko and Tsunade both gave him a flat look.

Tsunade turned back to Kushina and gave her a warm smile. "That's all right, though I'd like to hear the details later."

Kushina looked down feeling embarrassed. It suddenly occurred to her how... how *childish* what she had just done would seem to anyone outside the family. She hadn't really considered that, she'd just seen the opportunity to annoy her older brother and had taken it.

"My daughter will be more than happy to answer any questions you may have. In fact why don't you let her be your guide while you are here in the village?"

Tsunade smiled and nodded. "I'd like that."

---

"Permanent ink?" Tsunade sounded disbelieving. "Why would you use that?"

Kushina smiled evilly. "Because it's really, really hard to get off."

Tsunade just shook her head. Following the meeting with Naoko she had asked for Kushina to give her a tour of the village. Part of that was her mission, along with negotiating a treaty she was also to investigate the civilian population and see what their moral was like. Jiraiya was currently going with Naoko to take a look at the front line and see what sort of shape the whirlpool nins were in. Sarutobi-sensei wanted to know whether or not whirlpool was going to collapse. From what she had seen so far that certainly didn't seem to be the case. The people had a strong faith that their ninja would keep them safe.

She had a second motive as well, and that was to get to know the girl a little better. Though they had only met Tsunade already felt a

strong fondness for her. Though still young the girl had a strong will and was not afraid to speak her mind, two traits they shared.

"You know, you shouldn't do things like that to your brother," Tsunade said seriously.

Kushina looked up at her a bit upset. "What are you talking about? He deserves them! He's my sensei as well as my brother and he never lets up on me! He's totally brutal!"

Tsunade grinned knowingly. She had been that way with her little brother sometimes. "Tell me something, have you gotten stronger since he has been training you?"

"That's not the point!" Kushina insisted.

"My sensei used to be pretty rough on me and my teammates too, but he only did it to help us. Thanks to all his efforts the three of us are considered to be some of the most powerful ninja in our village. Don't be angry with your brother because he pushes you hard. It's all to make you stronger."

"But it's not even just that!" Kushina said. "Everyone loves him! He's the genius of our clan, the heir, a fifth level blade master, and an ANBU captain. Everyone is always telling me how great he is and how I need to be more like him! It's not fair!"

"So you're upset with him for being a powerful ninja?" Tsunade asked.

"He's only stronger because he's so much older than me! When I'm seventeen I'll be an even greater ninja than he is!"

"Maybe you will," Tsunade said. "But try not to be upset with your brother just because he excels." She paused for a moment. "I had a little brother named Nawaki. He wanted to be a great ninja and to always protect our village. I was his role model and he always strived



to be as strong as I was. He never resented the fact I was a strong, if he had it would have hurt me terribly."

Kushina had picked up her sadness as well as the word, 'had.' "What happened to him?"

"He was killed on his very first mission as a Genin."

They walked together in an awkward silence for a bit.

"I'm sorry," Kushina said sincerely. "I've lost a teammate and an uncle but I know losing a brother would be worse."

Tsunade nodded. "For awhile I was totally devastated. I still miss him even now. That's one more reason not to resent your brother. You should try and be close; you never know what might happen in the future."

"Well I am worried about my other brother Temjin, but not Urusai. I've seen him fight, if anyone survives this war it will be him."

Tsunade shook her head. "You call your brother, 'shut up?'"

"That's my name for him, the same way he always calls me kooky."

She was about to reply when she noticed what they were passing. "Is that a gaming den?"

Kushina looked over. "Oh, yeah we have a few of them. Mostly they dice and play cards."

"Why don't we go in for just a few minutes?"

"You want to go in a gaming den?" Kushina was surprised. "Do you like to gamble?"

"Just a little bit," Tsunade said with a grin. "Maybe I'll just play a quick hand of cards or toss the dice a couple of times. We'll just be a little bit." She steered her young guide towards the den.

---

## Four Hours Later

"That was amazing!" Kushina said enthusiastically.

"Heh, I'm glad you enjoyed it," Tsunade tried to grin.

"I've never ever seen anyone lose so much money in one sitting! You must be really rich to have so much cash on you and be able to just throw it away like that!"

The little girl's admiration was making Tsunade feel like the world's worst role model. "I am rich, so I can afford to lose a little. But you shouldn't try and be like me. Gambling is a bad habit and you should avoid it! Despite what you saw I only gamble once in a while."

"I understand," Kushina opened her purse and took out a thick roll of ryu notes, most of them were from Fire country. "Though I can see why some people enjoy it."

Tsunade sighed. "Do me a favor Kushina; let's keep this our little secret, o.k.?"

---

Early the next morning she found her brother sitting at the breakfast table fully dressed and waiting. He had a cloth sack with the handles to two wooden swords sticking out. His face looked kind of raw. No doubt due to countless washed with hot water and scrubbings. Despite the red in his face his lips pulled back in a big genial smile the second he spotted her. His eyes had a malevolent look about them. To her he seemed to be radiating pure evil.

"Good morning my dear little sister," Shinzou said sweetly.

Whenever he was nice to her in front of their parents it was always bad news.

"I hope you had a good night's rest, be sure and have a big breakfast. I have something special in mind for today's workout."

"You're not planning to take me out and then hunt me down and kill me for sport are you?" She was only half joking.

"Of course not," he said jovially. "I'll be doing it for revenge not sport."

For the life of her she couldn't tell if he was kidding.

## A lesson

"So in short, on behalf of the Hokage and the people of Konoha we are pleased and honored to ask you to become our formal allies." Jiraiya finished his long speech with a flourish as Uzumaki Naoko and the council sat listening. Tsunade was also listening. She'd agreed to let Jiraiya make the proposal once they'd agreed to extend the offer.

For his part Naoko eyed his copy of the document with a great deal of care. But also with disappointment.

"As village headsman let me say that on behalf of the council and my entire village we are honored that such a great man as your Hokage deems us worthy of an alliance with the mighty leaf village."

Jiraiya began to smile while Tsunade waited for the rest of it.

" *However*, while the spirit of the document is certainly positive I notice a distressing lack of detail."

"I'm afraid that with the pressures of war there wasn't time for greater specification. The old man thought the most important thing was to let you know as quickly as possible that you don't stand alone against Iwa." Jiraiya said.

"Standing alone is a good way to describe it." Naoko pointed out. "At the moment we are holding our own against an enemy with greater numbers and far greater reserves. Obviously support from Konoha could make all the difference. Yet I note there is no specific mention of the sort of aid your Hokage means to give us. The treaty mentions, 'forming a united front against aggression from Iwa' yet does not mention exactly *how* that is to be accomplished. Could you enlighten us?"

Jiraiya's smile slipped a little. He'd been sort of hoping just the fact one of the major powers was offering an alliance would have been enough. "I'm afraid the Hokage hasn't had a chance to firm up his plans as yet. They are still being developed."

"I will settle for a general estimate then. How does Sarutobi intend to help us maintain this front against our common enemy?"

"As soon as the treaty is ratified he intends to have some shipments of food and supplies sent to you. He also intends to issue you a war credit of 2 million ryu to allow you to purchase additional goods in Fire country."

Jiraiya's answer was not well received as the various council members began to mutter to one another. "Supplies and money are certainly important and we thank you for them," Noako stated. "But it's troops we need to not only hold the line but push the damn rock nins back. Can you give me a rough estimate of how many ninja your Hokage intends to send us?"

Jiraiya looked unhappy. "Well you see..."

"None," Tsunade suddenly spoke up and answered for him.

"None?" Naoko asked. The mutters from the council members grew louder.

Tsunade slowly came to her feet to stand beside her teammate. "I'm afraid for the time being logistical and financial support is all we can give you."

"You don't give a damn what happens to us," a council member named Jiyu said bitterly. "You're just hoping we kill a few rock nins for you before we go down."

"That's not the case at all!" Jiraiya insisted. "Sarutobi needs and wants you as allies and he intends to do everything he can to help you."

"Then send your troops here to help us!" Jiyou demanded. The other members of the council shouted their agreement.

"Calm down everyone," Naoko said sharply. "Let's not be rude to our guests and the Hokage's representatives." His words quieted them down, though Jiyou looked a bit mutinous. Naoko shifted his focus back to the two of them. "Can you tell me the reason *why* the Hokage does not choose to offer us military aid?"

"Because we don't have it to spare," Tsunade told them bluntly. "We are already at war in Wind country and in Grass and there's word that Hanzo, leader of Rain is about to make an alliance with Earth. That's a *third* front we'll have to defend in order to keep the enemy out of Fire country. For the moment we just don't have any ninja to spare."

"I see," Naoko answered quietly.

"The situation may change in the future," Jiraiya pointed out. "Once the pressure on us lessens then we can see about sending some troops here."

"But until such time we are on our own." Naoko said.

"Not completely," Tsunade said. "The supplies and money should help you."

"And keep in mind we'll be tying down large numbers of rock nins in both Grass and Rain. Ninja who won't be available to attack you." Jiraiya mentioned.

"Which you would do regardless as it's in your own self defense." Naoko stated.

Jiraiya and Tsunade could only acknowledge that.

Naoko sighed and took another look at the treaty. "I'll admit when you first arrived I had some hopes of seeing an army of leaf nin

following in your wake. But what you want isn't always what you get. I'll sign the treaty."

"You will?" Jiraiya sounded a little surprised.

"Of course," Naoko said. He looked at the council members. "I would be a fool to reject any help that is offered to me." With a pen he signed the treaty. He then poured on some red wax and stamped down with his personal seal. He did the same to a second copy. Jiraiya and Tsunade both signed each copy on the Hokage's behalf.

With that Leaf and Whirlpool became formal allies in the war against Rock.

---

The sun was starting to set. Looking out on the ocean it was a magnificent sight. The sky was a mix of wine red and dark orange above a shining sea.

Kushina failed to appreciate it. She was on her knees panting. Her arms felt completely dead and were just hanging at her side. The entire day had been one endless circle drill.

Her brother had brought them to a section of the Flats. 'If you want to wear the black and red again or use your katana there's only one way.' He had drawn a circle in the sand around the spot where he was standing. 'You don't get either until you knock me out of this circle.'

That had been in the morning. She had attacked him almost nonstop for about ten hours. She'd used every feint, every trick, and every move she could think of, but no matter what she did his sword was always there to block her. She had thrown everything she had and it hadn't been enough. *It's not fair! I did the best I could!* Though she tried to stop it she felt tears start sliding down her cheek. She couldn't even lift her arms to wipe them.

"Are you crying?" Shinzou asked.

"No!" Since she couldn't lift her arms she turned her face away.

"Crying won't get you your katana back," he said teasingly.

"I know that you big jerk! What am I supposed to do?" She said angrily. Despite her total exhaustion her brother had a real gift for making her angry.

"I told you; knock me out of the circle."

"I tried! What do you think I've been doing?" She staggered up to her feet. She still couldn't lift her arms. She faced him with her tears still coming. "I did everything I could."

"Wrong! There was one move you never tried." He shook his. "The whole point of this drill is to teach you something. But I guess you're just not smart enough to figure it out."

She was bone tired and barely able to stand but hearing him say that just filled her with fury. "Damn it!" She screamed and *ran* straight at him. She had the satisfaction of seeing a look of real surprise on his smug face. She was an unarmed twelve year old girl charging a seventeen year old boy who weighed twice as much and had a wooden sword in his hand. She knew she would probably be punished for what she was doing but didn't care so long as she got to **hit** him. She lowered her shoulder and aimed for his legs. He didn't step out of the circle. He tried to dodge but there was not much room to without stepping out. As she was about to run into him he lifted his practice sword and brought it straight down onto her back with a loud, 'thwack.' She grunted in pain but didn't slow down. Her right shoulder hit his thigh and as she kept going she was able to knock him over and out of the circle.

She wound up tripping and ended up face down and eating sand. He brother was lying on his ass right next to her.

She lifted her head and glared at him. "There! I got you out of the circle!" He stared back at her and she waited for him to start yelling.



But instead he put his head back and began laughing. "Heh, heh, took, heh, you long enough."

She looked at him. "What's so damn funny?"

"The lesson, you finally figured it out." He was still laughing as he got back to his feet.

Seeing him in a sudden good mood made her suspect a trick. "I did?"

He nodded. "You still don't realize what it is do you?"

"If I say no will we do more circle drills?" To her immense relief he shook his head.

"You got me out of the circle, you accomplished your goal."

"But, but... I'm not allowed to hit you with anything but my sword. Just tackling you like that broke the rules."

"That's right." He sounded approving.

"I don't understand."

He smiled as he began to explain. "Kushina, I'm five years older than you are and a lot better with the sword. There was never any way you could hit me, never mind force me out, with your sword. As long as you followed the rules there was no way for you to succeed."

She glared at him. "Then what was the point?"

"The point was what you finally figured out, that the only way to succeed and achieve the goal was to break the rules. The point of this exercise was to teach you that sometimes, in some situations, breaking the rules is necessary."

"That's it?" She said disbelieving.

"That's it," he confirmed.

"Why didn't you just tell me that to begin with? Or did you just enjoy beating me black and blue?"

"It's not a lesson you can just tell someone. After all, we spend years drilling obedience into you and instructing you on all the rules you are expected to follow. How would it make sense to have us just say, 'you can break the rules if you need to?' You're taught all the rules of shinobi conduct for a reason, they're important and *should* be followed. It's only in extreme circumstances where you may need to break them. That's what the circle drills were for, to put you in an unfair, no win situation. To force you to realize that the goal was only attainable by breaking the rules."

"So does this mean I get to wear the clan colors and get my katana back?"

"Of course."

"And I don't have to do any more circle drill? Ever?"

He laughed again. "No Kushina you're done with circle drills, I'll have to come up with a new way to torture you."

She smiled up at him. "You're calling me Kushina."

"Don't get used to it." He knelt down with his back to her. "Here now climb on; I'll carry you back home."

Normally she would have argued she didn't need any help. But she figured he owed her this for all the torture she'd endured.

As he took her home the warmth of his body and the motion soon had her fast asleep. When Shinzou got her home he saw her sleeping peacefully so took her up to her room and put her gently to bed.

---

The following morning Kushina was awakened in time to say goodbye to the two leaf nins as they headed back to Konoha.

"Do you have to go so soon? Couldn't you stay a few more days?" Kushina pleaded.

"I'm sorry Kushina," Tsunade reached down and patted her head. "But we have orders. I'd love to stay awhile but I can't."

"Maybe your father can send you to Konoha on a diplomatic mission some time." Jiraiya suggested. "We are allies now."

Kushina looked to her father excitedly. "Can I father?"

"Maybe one day," Naoko said, careful not to make any sort of promise. "But for right now I can't spare you or anyone else."

Tsunade smiled down at the little girl. "If you ever do visit I'll be your tour guide the way you were mine."

"That would be great!" Kushina said excitedly.

On a sudden impulse Tsunade reached down and gave the girl a hug. "Take good care of yourself Kushina, and try not to be too hard on your brother."

She frowned. "I'll try, but he doesn't make it easy."

"Talk about the pot calling the kettle black," Shinzou muttered.

With a few waves goodbye the two leaf ninja left the village hidden in the whirlpool.

## The best of us Part 1

A little over two years had passed since the visit of Tsunade and Jiraiya. In that time the war had not gone well for either Whirlpool or Leaf. The leaf nins had continued to do fairly well against the forces of Sand where they slowly ground forward against an outnumbered opponent. In the Grass and Rain theaters though they had suffered a series of defeats where they and their Grass allies were the ones outnumbered by the Earth / Rain ninja. The worst of these failures had been caused by their greatest warrior, the legendary White Fang. And to make things even worse he had committed suicide not long after. During this time stories were also coming in about three very special you ninja, Jiraiya, Orochimaru, and Tsunade were starting to make names for themselves. Yet despite their heroics and the heroics of other leaf nin Konoha continued to suffer setbacks against the forces of Iwa.

In Whirlpool the war had settled down into a seemingly endless series of raids and ambushes. There were no major battles, only a slow never ending carnage as both sides bled. The earth nins always bled more. The ninja of Whirlpool knew every hill and hiding spot in the land and were expert at catching the rock nins by surprise. But the problem was that if the rock nins lost twenty ninja in a given month and the Whirlpool lost only ten, those twenty would be replaced, while the ten could not be. The result was that even if Whirlpool held their own and won most of their fights they continued to grow weaker and their numbers smaller. Since Tsunade and Jiraiya's departure no other leaf nins had visited. They still received supplies and war credits but no actual troops. They continued to stand alone.

Their one and only advantage was that Iwa was at war throughout the elemental lands, fighting on several fronts against multiple enemies. For them Whirlpool was just a minor battle front.

---

Kushina was now fourteen and quickly approaching fifteen. Her reputation within the village had been growing. She was now a third level blade master and a freshly promoted Jonin. People were beginning to say that the Uzumakis had produced another prodigy and genius. (Though it annoyed her that no one was suggesting she was anywhere near the ninja her older brother was.) Throughout the past two years she and her annoying older brother had remained a team. They would often temporarily hook up with other groups for a mission, but she and Shinzou were kept as a unit. That was most unusual and she of course knew that her father was to blame.

That evening the clan was holding a special celebratory dinner to honor Kushina's promotion to Jonin. She was pleased to see both her father and Temjin were there as well. Because the front was so close to the village most of the ninja were kept in the field for three weeks and then allowed to rotate home for a week of rest. Thus roughly a quarter of the ninja population would be in the village at any given moment. But the schedules were staggered and often changed given circumstances. Over the past two years she had only seen Temjin perhaps ten times. Her father she had seen even less. As villages headsmen he was responsible for the entire war effort. When he was not in the field overlooking the army he would be spending long hours in his government office. On those rare occasions when Kushina did get to see him she couldn't help but notice that he seemed to always have more grey hair.

As they ate dinner talk centered around, what else, the war.

"So do you think the rumors are true?" Shinzou asked as he tore into a rare piece of beef.

"You mean the ones about the village hidden in the moonlight?" His uncle Saishu asked. At his nephew's nod he continued morosely. "We've had the news from several sources, it seems certain."

All along the table there were mutters of, 'damn rock nins' and other darker comments.

"Hard to believe even the rock nins could be that savage." Her mother said.

All the family members who were ninja shared a look; *they* didn't find it hard to believe at all. Despite all the horror stories that made it to the village there were plenty more that had been kept quiet.

"I'm afraid we have to believe it my dear," her father said quietly. "The rock nins captured the village, executed every enemy ninja, and took the entire civilian population back to Iwa in chains. They completely **destroyed** the village hidden in the moonlight. Just conquering it wasn't enough for them. It's a lesson we all need to remember."

Up and down the table there was glum silence. No one needed to say what they were all thinking. That if Whirlpool ever fell they would get the same.

"That's just one more reason for us to keep fighting hard." He finished up the food on his plate, wiped his mouth, and stood. "Well if you'll excuse me I'm going to go."

"Where are you going?" His mother said unhappily. "This is a celebration dinner for your sister!"

"I've already congratulated her, and besides I see her every single day."

"It's o.k. mom," Kushina said innocently. "He probably has a hot date with Shinibou."

He immediately sent her a warning look. "Kooky..."

"Call your sister by her name please," his mother said curtly. "Who is this Shinibou? Have I met her?"

"Ah, she's just a friend mom."

"Oh?" Kushina tried to sound surprised. "Do you usually stick your tongue down a friend's throat?"

He glared at the newly minted Jonin. "You were spying on me!"

She sent him an angelic little smile. "I prefer to call it protective surveillance."

From the head of the table Uzumaki Naoko laughed.

---

Following the dinner Naoko asked Kushina to join him in his study. The moment the door closed she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him an unhappy look.

"Am I in trouble for spying on Urusai?"

Naoko sighed. "When your mother and I named him I don't believe, 'Shut Up' was what we decided on. Your brother's name is Shinzou, and no you're not in trouble."

"Then what did you want to talk about dad?"

"Your request to go into the ANBU."

"What about it?"

"We'll be having another academy class graduating soon."

She looked at him suspiciously. "So?"

"How would you like your own squad of Genin?"

She immediately and vehemently shook her head. "No! Absolutely not! I want to go into the ANBU." She gave her father a flat look.

"And why would you want me to be a sensei anyway? There are plenty of ninja with a lot more experience who are better qualified."

He smiled at her proudly. "I just think you would make a fine sensei."

"And how long would I have to spend training them before I could take them on a real mission?"

"Ah, well right now we feel six months..."

"No," she cut him off. "I want to be ANBU just like Shinzou was. Let me take the ANBU exam and I'm sure I can pass it."

He was sure she would pass it too, that was what worried him. The ANBU were given the most dangerous missions. He had complete faith in her as a ninja, but she was still his little girl. He tried to play up the advantages of being a sensei but she was having none of it. She knew her father well and knew what he was up to.

"Dad," she finally said. "I know what you're trying to do, and I love you for it. But I'm a ninja of the Whirlpool, you can't keep me safe. Let me go where I can do the most good."

He sighed, she was right and he knew it. "Very well, I have one last mission for the two of you though. You're going on a special scouting mission."

She smiled. "So after tonight I'll never have to take orders from Shinzou again?"

He chuckled. "Well... you do know he used to be an ANBU captain."

She looked at him with horror. "Oh daddy you wouldn't!"

He laughed and refused to answer.

---

Ryozo carefully studied the maps and the schedules. Speed and secrecy were the key. He had been given a golden opportunity to win the glory he had longed for since receiving his command. He glanced up at his subordinate. "You have no idea how hard it was to get these forces transferred to this theater."



Aono nodded. "It is quite an honor; you are being given a second army."

"A very small second army," Ryoza commented. "And I am only being given them for three weeks before they must go to reinforce the front in Grass." He looked back at the maps and smiled. "But that should be long enough."

Aono again nodded. "A quick surprise attack with overwhelming numbers from a force they don't even suspect exists." He frowned slightly. "Though there is danger in using the coast."

"This miserable country has almost no roads and is filled with bogs and marshes." Ryoza reminded him. "Any other path would slow you down and might be discovered. During low tide the beaches will provide you a straight run to the village. So long as secrecy is maintained you cannot fail. You have the command and I trust you to bring me victory."

Aono bowed to him. "I shall do my best."

"How long until all three hundred ninja are concentrated and ready?"

"The last contingent should arrive in ten hours. Given the tides we can begin moving shortly before dawn. However, I would look to give the men a couple days to rest; they have come all the way across the continent. All the way from the village hidden in the moonlight."

Ryoza shook his head. "They can have all the rest they want *after* the battle. These men will have a rare honor; they will have captured and destroyed two ninja villages in less than a month's time. That will go down in history."

"The men will be tired, though. A little rest will make them more effective."

"They are ninja of the Rock," Ryoza said coldly. "They are as hard and uncaring as the mountain; they can attack even if they are a little

weary. Now go to your post and ready the attack, by this time tomorrow Whirlpool village will be a smoking ruin and the war here all but over."

---

"I really hate you," Kushina told her older brother as they approached the gate. The sun had been down for a number of hours and it was getting on towards midnight.

"After what you said about Shinibou shouldn't that be my line?"

"She's a tramp," Kushina told him with disdain. "Why do you even like her?"

He grinned down at his little sister. "Well she does this thing with her tongue..."

She slapped her hands over her ears. "Ewww! You disgusting pervert! Don't say such nasty things to your own sister!"

He couldn't help but laugh. "You know I'm going to miss torturing you."

"Don't worry," she said glumly. "I'm sure you'll somehow end up being my captain in the ANBU." She glared at him openly. "Funny how you keep being in charge of me."

"Don't look at me, take it up with father. Any way, let's get on with our mission." The gates were quickly opened and shut as soon as they were outside.

"So what's the mission?"

"It's a patrol up the coast, our last couple patrols got ambushed so we need to be careful."

Kushina nodded, just a patrol like a hundred others she and Urusai had gone on. It shouldn't be too hard.

## The best of us part 2

As the commander of the assault Aono was in his tent going over the maps of the local country. *What a miserable land*, he thought *half of it is bog, marsh, and crag. Why do even want this damn place?* He knew the answer to that of course, they wanted because it was there. No matter how wretched the land was taking it would expand the borders of Earth country and look good on a map. It would also clear the path for the next assault on Waterfall.

Looking back down at the map he knew it was anything but completely accurate. They knew there were plenty of bogs and marshes filled with quick sand and sink holes but where they were exactly was a guess. The Whirlpool ninja knew, they seemed to know every blade of grass. For him to lead an army through such, even an army of ninja, would be slow and difficult. Unless he had them expend most of their chakra while doing so. But that had its own dangers; going into battle with low chakra reserves against a rested enemy was a very bad idea. That was why the beach was vital to this assault. When low tide came they would have a nice flat road that would take them directly to Whirlpool village.

Aono was different from his commander. Whereas Ryozo was eager for glory Aono cared only about carrying out his orders. He wanted to capture Whirlpool as quickly and with as low a cost as possible. Right now most of his men were sleeping, or at least trying to sleep. They would depart about an hour before sunrise and hit the village in the pre dawn light. If everything went according to plan it would be all over before noon. There would still be enemy nin in the field of course, but with out their village dealing with them would be a mop up operation.

In the meantime there was a heavy screen patrolling the lands south to deal with any intruders. Just so long as they could maintain secrecy they were almost certain to win.

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A single rock nin came to a stop on the edge of a salt marsh. He had a burn scar covering most of the right side of his face. Tied to his hip was a sword. He looked all around carefully; he'd thought he'd seen something.

---

Hidden behind the tall grass Kushina slowly moved her hand to her sword.

Shinzou noticed and made a hand sign. " *Stop.*"

" *Why?*"

Frowning he pointed to himself before signing. " *Obey.*"

Frowning herself she drew her hand away from her sword and gave a quick nod. After a few minutes of looking things over the rock nin finally moved on. At that point Kushina leaned in close to her brother to whisper to him. "Why did you stop me? I could have taken him easy."

He looked at her very calmly. Her brother was such a child at times. But when they were in the field she would see another side of him. He would stop being the annoying older brother and suddenly transform into the great ANBU captain everyone said he was. "When was the last time you saw a single enemy on patrol?"

Actually she hadn't thought of that. She'd been so focused on wanting to attack him the question had never even occurred to her. "You know, I don't think I ever have. We always run into them in squads."

"Single patrols can cover a lot more ground."

"But they're easier to take out."

Shinzou nodded. "True, but even if they're taken out silently you can bet it won't be long before it's noticed someone is missing. For some

reason the rock nins are going to an awful lot of trouble to keep unwanted eyes out."

She could only nod. They'd been dodging patrols all night. "Why are there so many patrols out here in the middle of nowhere?"

Shinzou looked westward. "They're guarding something, and it's something that's damn important to them."

"So what do we do? We're at the end of our patrol range, we're supposed to head back."

"We're not going back yet," he said decisively. "I want to see what's so damn important to them."

She couldn't help but grin. "So we're breaking the rules of the mission?" She couldn't help but think back to her circle drills.

He nodded. "Some times you have to break the rules to accomplish your goal. Now come on."

---

They stuck to the marshes and bogs as much as possible, avoiding the firmer ground that was more likely to be watched. They moved slowly and carefully, sacrificing speed for stealth. Every foot they traveled took them deeper and deeper into enemy territory. There was no moon out and with only starlight it was pitch dark. That was a blessing to their mission, but also made it harder for them to travel. They didn't use chakra to walk across the bogs and salt marshes. They were conserving their chakra for battle and possible escape.

After a couple more near run ins with single patrols they came out of the wetlands and into an area of drier and better ground. Crawling around a patch of tall grass on the side of a hill they suddenly found what they were looking for. The two of them squatted down and each took out their binoculars to get a closer view. (Kushina had received hers as a birthday gift.) Even under starlight the enemy camp came into sharp clear view. As a camp it was nothing really special. Just a

couple hundred tents or so surrounded by a simple ditch and stockade. But the location and all the efforts the damn rock nins had gone through to keep it secret was the problem.

"It's an attack force," Shinzou whispered. "They have to be planning a surprise attack on the village."

"Wh... what do we do?" Kushina could feel her heart begin to pound. She was a veteran and had seen plenty of combat. But the sudden realization that the two of them had stumbled across an entire enemy camp was scary.

"We sneak out just like we snuck in and tell the village that there's an imminent invasion threat."

She gave him an eager nod and the two of them began slowly backing away. But before they could break cover a group of three rock nins landed about a hundred yards directly behind them. Shinzou and Kushina froze. Fortunately they were still under the cover of the grass. Unfortunately there was nothing but open space between where they were and where the enemy was. But worst of all the rock nins seemed to be studying the ground intently.

"They've spotted our tracks," Shinzou whispered with a sickening certainty. "They'll be on top of us in a minute."

As they watched one of the three leapt away while the other two stayed right where they were.

"He's going to get help," Kushina said. She put her hand to her sword to draw it. "I guess there's no choice but to rush..."

Shinzou caught her hand and kept her from pulling out her weapon. "Change of plans Kooky. I want you to wait until those two are gone and then I want you to get back to the village as fast as you possibly can to warn them. Stick to the bogs but use your chakra to run through them. Avoid the patrols if you can but speed is the priority not stealth." He brought his face close to hers and gave her a look of

such intensity that it scared her more than the rock nins. "It's all on you now, the fate of the village depends on you." Then he did something that truly scared her. He hugged her.

"Wha... what are you..."

"I love you Kooky," he whispered to her. "I know you'll be a much better ninja than me someday. I'm sorry I won't get to see it. Tell mom, dad, and everyone that I love them."

She understood. "Shinzou don't..."

He smiled. "For the Uzumaki, for the village, and for you."

He shoved her back and leapt out of the grass. His sword was out and he was **screaming** at the top of his lungs. The two Iwa nin were caught by surprise. They got their weapons out but never stood a chance as Shinzou cut them down with his katana.

"COME ON YOU IWA BASTARDS!!" He ran south away from her position as there were of the shouts and movement coming from all around. All of it being focused on him as he ran away.

"Urusai," she whispered. *Oh Kami he's sacrificing himself for me!* She wanted to go after him; she wanted to protect him even if it meant she was going to die. But she knew she couldn't do that. She had to get to the village or mother, father, Timjin, and everyone would die. And his sacrifice would be for nothing. "Oh forgive me." She leapt away from the hill side and ran, unobserved, away.

---

Aono was pacing outside his command tent when the prisoner was finally dragged over to him. He was thrown roughly down and the hatred in the eyes of his men made it clear they wanted to kill him. Only their orders had caused them to bring him in alive.

"This bastard killed twenty men before we could take him!" One of his ninja said furiously before kicking the tied up prisoner.

The Whirlpool nin grunted in pain but then laughed through his bloody mouth. "I wish it could have been twenty more."

The same rock nin kicked again harder.

"Enough!" Aono said sharply. "I need him alive for now." He looked down at the man. He was covered in blood from wounds all over his arms and legs, but none looked life threatening. He had lost a lot of blood though. Despite the blood and the damage to his clothing there was no mistaking the red and black bodysuit. "I should have known that if anyone could lead a successful patrol to find this camp it would be an Uzumaki. How many in your patrol and what route did you take to get here?"

The Uzumaki looked up at him with a swollen face and a mouth full of bloody teeth. "It was just me, I came alone and I don't remember how exactly I got here."

"If you'd actually come here alone you'd swear that you were leading not one but two or three patrols." Aono reasoned. "It doesn't matter, whoever you came with they won't make it back out."

The Uzumaki smiled and said nothing.

"Answer my questions and I promise you fair treatment."

"Fuck you," the Uzumaki said pleasantly. "Like a fucking rock nin would even know what fair treatment was."

Aono looked at the men who had brought him in. "I need to know everything about the patrol he led and I need to know now. Send out trackers to help our patrols catch them." He looked back down at the prisoner. "I don't care what you do but get me my answers, and don't kill him. When we're done we'll send him to the commander. Ryoza would love the chance to meet the great Uzumaki Shinzou. It's not often you capture someone who is in the Bingo Book."

Shinzou chuckled a bit. "Ah, fame."



That earned him another kick in the ribs. Despite the pain he still laughed. They could do whatever they wanted, he could hold out long enough to protect her. They could send out as many trackers as they wanted. No Iwa nin would ever be able to catch her going through those bogs. *She'll make it back I know it.* Even as they tied him up to a post and stripped off his armor and clothing he smiled. So long as she made it, it was all worth it.

---

In the darkness the guards saw a figure running towards the gate and tensed. "Halt! Identify yourselves!"

The figure came to stop and stood there panting and shuddering. Even with her huge reserves she had used up most of her chakra getting back as fast as was humanly possible. Between breaths she managed to answer.

"I am... Uzumaki... Kushina... and I need... to see... my father."

## The best of us part 3

Her mother was crying. Really she was almost hysterical, weeping and wailing out her brother's name. Her mother had always been so strong, always faced every hardship with a warm smile. Kushina had seen her cry a few times before, but never like this. *Of course she's never been like this*, Kushina thought. *She just lost her first born*. Kushina wanted to go over and curl herself up around her and just try to somehow comfort her. Try to make the pain just a little less. Aunt Nitsune and many of the other women in her family were doing that. They were huddled around her poor mother trying to give whatever comfort they could. All of them were crying.

She wasn't crying. She wanted to. She wanted to cry and scream and rip her hair out. But she was a ninja, and ninja didn't cry. At least not where others could see. She glanced over to the dinner table. Her father and uncle Saishu were talking along with some of the council members who had rushed over. She knew her father had to be just as heart broken as she was, but he wasn't crying. When she had told him what had happened he'd taken it about as well as he could have. The color had drained out of his face and he'd stood there stunned for just a moment. Then he had gathered himself and told her to rest as he went to start gathering the forces of Whirlpool. Only *after* that had he gone to tell her mother what had happened. Even now, his duty to the village came first.

It was five in the morning but the Uzumaki compound was alive with activity as people hurried in and out. The ANBU had been sent out to start waking and gathering all the ninja in the village who were on leave. Men and women were being roused from their beds and being ordered to gather and prepare for battle.

"We should have about weighty ninja in the village," she heard her uncle Saishu say. "We should send messengers to the front for more men. With the front lines being so close we can have another hundred ninja here in less than an hour."

"That's still too long," her father said. "Besides if they spot us pulling troops out they might just decide to launch an attack there as well." He looked over at his brother. "We'll leave immediately with what we have."

"Kushina said they number anywhere from two to four hundred," Saishu said. "We'll be badly outnumbered."

"So what? We're always outnumbered. Given where their camp was they must be planning to use the coast as their invasion route." Naoko had a very grim smile. "If they're stupid enough to try that we'll not only stop them, we'll slaughter them."

Kushina was surprised when she saw how confident her father was. She was even more surprised when she saw her uncle suddenly with an evil grin.

"You're going to use *that* aren't you?"

"You're damn right I am." Uzumaki Naoko looked over to where she was and nodded to her. "Kushina I want you to stay here and..."

"No," she said and gritted her teeth. "I'm coming with you! I'm not staying here while you're fighting those damn rock nins."

"You're almost completely out of chakra," her father pointed out.

"I don't need chakra to fight with my sword! I'm going." She crossed her arms and stood her ground defiantly. After what had happened she had to fight. She wanted to kill damn rock nins; she wanted them to pay for her brother. She knew that even if she killed a million it would never be enough to make up for what she had lost. But she still needed to make them pay.

Her father eyed her for a moment, but rather than the argument she'd been expecting he just gave her a nod. "Very well, but I want you by my side."

"Yes father."

---

The forces of Whirlpool poured out of the gate and into the predawn night. They all understood how desperate the situation was and they were all silent and grim. But every one of them was ready to do whatever was necessary to save their homes and loved ones.

---

Aono looked over the brave men he was about to lead into battle. He was not one for glory, so he found it ironic that he was about to earn ever lasting glory by leading this army to capture and destroy an enemy village. The men he was leading would enjoy the unique honor of having conquered two ninja villages in the space of a month. He was sure that victory would be theirs.

And yet... he'd heard nothing from his patrols about catching any escaping enemy nin. The prisoner had refused to talk no matter how he was beaten, and now they were out of time. It was low tide and the water was receding to let their sandy road appear. This was their one opportunity to catch the enemy by surprise and win easily. He had to go now or else cancel the attack all together. He had doubts, but he pushed them aside. Nothing in war was ever certain, no matter what the odds looked like you always took a chance. *Maybe* someone had sent eh came and made it back. *Maybe* their intel would be believed and the enemy would act on it. And *maybe* they would be able to move fast enough and with enough force to check them. But then again maybe the prisoner had come alone, maybe his squad mates had been dealt with and the message was even now coming back to camp. Maybe in spite of what had happened they could still take the enemy by surprise and take the village easily.

Whatever the case, he could only go by what he knew for certain. He judged the odds to still be high and in his favor. He looked out at the faces that were all eagerly looking back at him. Despite being tired from the long march these men were eager to go. "For Iwa and the Tsuchikage," he cried out. "Begin the advance! Forward to Whirlpool!"

He was greeted by a singular shout as the men started running.

*In a matter of hours it will all be over. It will be a slaughter.* Aono thought

He could not have imagined just how right he was.

---

They took up their positions less than five miles from the village walls. They spread out and hid themselves in the sawgrass that was growing all along the seaside. They were all expert at hiding themselves and they all seemed to disappear in the landscape.

Kushina was at her father's side. She was exhausted both physically and emotionally yet filled with that hot anticipation that only combat could bring. She wanted them to come.

"I am very proud of you Kushina," her father said.

"Wha... what?"

He looked at her seriously. "You did your duty and brought us the information we had to have. I am very proud of you."

She stared back at him. "But... but Shinzou..."

"Did his duty too, and I am proud of him as well."

"I... I left him," she could feel her throat tighten and an ache in her chest.

"No," her father said firmly. "You did what you had to do, and so did he. He was the best of us; he made the sacrifice that was necessary to save the village. Remember him with honor and with love, but without guilt. You did not abandon him Kushina; you did what had to be done."

She couldn't help it. His kind words seemed to force the tears from her. She immediately turned her face away. "I'm sorry father, I... I

know ninja must not shed tears."

She felt his hand gently lift her chin back up so she could look into his face. There were tears in his eyes as well. "Even if we are ninja, we remain human, and occasionally we are reminded of the fact." He put his arms around her and drew into an embrace. "No one else can see. Be strong in front of others, for they draw strength from you. But if you need to be weak in front of those you love there is no shame in it."

Hidden in the tall grass she and her father wept together and mourned.

---

Before the main body arrived they were preceded by a couple scouts. These were taken out without a sound, their bodies grabbed and taken into the grass. Not long after that they spotted a mass of men running down the beach in the gathering predawn light. Seeing them on the move towards them Kushina grimaced. They weren't a huge force, but they were big enough.

"This should be an interesting fight," Kushina said.

"No," her father said as he took out a kunai. "This won't be a fight at all. All we'll need do is deal with the ones who run." He calmly sliced open his palm and let his blood drip down into a small pool of salt water.

"We'll definitely stop them, but it'll be a hard fight." Kushina tried to contradict him. He looked at her and he had that same wicked grin she'd seen when he was talking to uncle Saishu.

"You've never seen the full power of the Uzumaki clan," her father told her. He began working a long complicated series of hand signs. "It's time for you to see the reason no enemy has ever successfully attacked the village by sea." He timed it perfectly, completing the last hand sign just as the enemy was approaching their position. "

**Summoning of the Kraken."**

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Everything had gone perfectly. It was almost dawn and they were now just a few miles from their target. Aono was now certain that everything would go according to plan. That was when he felt a monstrous surge of chakra coming from the sea. He was far from the only one as the men all around turned to look at the water.

The water suddenly grew choppy and rough, and then from all around eight massive tentacles began to rise up out of the ocean. They were colossal, rising hundreds of feet into the air and wide enough to cover a city block. Just the sight of those things rising out of the ocean made men freeze with panic. A few of them kept their heads and fired off some jutsu or kunai with explosive notes. There were a few explosions on the fleshy side of one of the arms. The flesh was torn and some blood began to rain down. Compared to the mass of the arm the wound seemed little more than a pin prick. But the water stirred and all the tentacles began to wave as if in reaction to pain.

Down they all came slamming into the sandy earth. Many were crushed beneath those appendages, even more found themselves held by suckers or swept out into the water. Those who had somehow avoided being caught or killed made mad dashes in land and away from the water. These ran straight into the waiting Whirlpool nin who swiftly cut them down.

As Kushina and her fellow Whirlpool nins watched what seemed like a gigantic bird's beak burst up out of the waves. From beneath this beak a monstrous body arose up out of the water. The monster's flesh was pink and they could see vast veins pulsing just beneath the skin. A single yellow eye rose above the sea. It turned and focused on the tasty morsels held firm by its suckers. The helpless Iwa nins screamed and struggled to somehow get away. They kept screaming as the tentacles suddenly released them and they fell down into the waiting mouth below. The beak opened wide and then snapped shut eagerly consuming them. Those who had been swept

out into the water were then grabbed and hoisted into the air to share the same fate.

From the safety of the shore Kushina and the others watched as the rock nins could do nothing but scream as they were devoured by the monster.

"Is that our clan summons?" Kushina whispered.

"It is," Naoko said. "A mindless beast that we can summon, I would not honor it with the title of clan summons."

The screams faded as fewer and fewer enemy nin were left. Until at last they were all gone. The Kraken turned its eye to where Kushina and the others were standing. She took a quick step back.

"I think it wants to eat us too!"

"Yes," Naoko said calmly. "It's a monster without intelligence and driven only by hunger. But it can't harm us so long as I will it not too."

To the vast relief of all present the Kraken slipped beneath the waves and was gone. The entire enemy force was destroyed without the loss of a single life on their side.

Thanks to the noble sacrifice of Uzumaki Shinzou the village had been saved.

---

It was late afternoon when he was smuggled into the enemy fortress. The Iwa nins went through a great deal of trouble to make sure no one spotted him. They seemed to be afraid of a possible rescue effort. He was dragged through their hallways to a large room where he was bound to a chair in chains. Despite the beating he'd received and the broken bones and teeth he still smiled at them. No one had come right out and said it, but the sour and sullen looks from all his captors made it obvious. They had lost, and from the mood probably



lost badly. Kushina had made it in time then, the clan and village would survive.

Despite his injuries and all the chains there were still five guards in the room with him. They still thought him dangerous. As he sat there helpless an angry looking man came in holding a familiar weapon in his hands.

"Uzumaki Shinzou," Ryoza said. "You will be very happy to know that our attack force was annihilated. Apparently your teammates were able to escape our net and warn your village."

Shinzou would have made a pleased comment, but along with being chained he was also gagged.

Ryoza placed the katana on his neck. "I have always wanted one of these famous Uzumaki katanas and I thank you for the gift. They tell me you killed twenty ninja with it before they were able to capture you." There were growls from the various guards. Ryoza just grinned and added just a little more pressure to the blade. "Killing you with your own weapon would seem a fitting end now wouldn't it?" Ryoza had wanted to see fear and hear some whimpering from the damn Uzumaki. But all he got was a calm stare that had no fear in it at all.

"But that would be much too kind," Ryoza took the sword away. "I think I like the idea of you suffering and dying a pointless and anonymous death. You'll go to Iwa as a slave and work in the quarries digging granite." He gave his prisoner a dazzling smile. "Healthy young men usually last eight months or so before they just wear out and die. You're a strong ninja, maybe you can last two or three years." He laughed in his face.

*I'll last for as long as I can, he decided. Just to show you Iwa bastards how tough we Uzumaki are. It doesn't matter what happens to me anyway. The clan and the village will survive, and that's enough.*

The rock nins only took ninja prisoners for information or if they had a specific skill that was needed (such as medic nin.) These prisoners were always killed as soon as they had served their purpose. So as Shinzou began the long journey to Iwa no one on his ever even suspected he might still be alive.

---

That night Kushina was alone in her bedroom looking at her reflection in a mirror. With a kunai she was slicing off her long red hair. It was a sign of mourning; she would keep it short for a year in honor of Urusai's memory. *You were wrong about one thing, she thought. I'll never be better than you. You were the very best, and even though I hated you for it some times, I was always so proud that you were my big brother. I'll never be as smart or as brave or as skilled as you were. But I swear I will try to be the best ninja and person I can. And I swear I will never play another prank again.* She chuckled, knowing how happy that would have made him. *I'll do all that to honor you, that is my promise of a lifetime.* She shut her eyes and silently wept as she cut off her hair and remembered him.

## The OTHER blonde ninja from Konoha

Ryozo stood upon the battlements of his fortress. He looked out to the nearby hills. They were still occupied by the whirlpool ninja. The two sides were separated by nothing more than a couple miles of empty ground. But they were satisfied to simply watch one another. Neither side could risk the losses of an attack against the enemy stronghold.

Following the disaster two and a half years ago Ryozo had been summoned back to Iwa to answer personally to the Tsuchikage. Had Aono's attack succeeded he would have received the glory of conquering Whirlpool. Instead he had received the full blame for losing an entire army. The Tsuchikage had bluntly told him that if he had not been the second son of a Council member he would have been publicly executed for incompetence. His high birth had saved his life, but he'd still been punished. Rather than dismiss him or even demote him the Tsuchikage had sent him back here. He was still a general in command of the forces in his theater. But he was no longer to receive anything but the minimal amount of support from home.

They still received enough food and supplies to continue functioning, but nothing more. Too many rock nins had already died. Whirlpool was not worth any more sacrifice. When he lost ninja they were not replaced. Requests for reinforcements were simply ignored. Ryozo was forced to watch helplessly as his army began to slowly wither away. They would keep the territory they had already taken. (They needed *something* to show for all the lives they'd squandered.) But they were now mostly left with just patrolling and defending their conquest. He had no choice but to remain on the defensive and simply protect his fortress line.

And the worst of it? Since the enemy was no longer being pressed they'd begun launching raids into earth country.

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From the nearby shadows she watched as three guards shuffled along the top of the dam. It was one in the morning and they were obviously bored and tired. It was just as obvious that they thought being fifty miles from the front line meant they were safe.

Beneath her mask she smiled and drew out her katana. She was about to show them and many others that their little war had come home.

---

She wiped clean her blade before slipping it back into its sheath. Three bodies were lying on the concrete walkway. She didn't take any special pride in what she'd just done. They'd been ordinary guards, for someone like her killing regular soldiers was like killing sheep. With the guards dealt with jumped over the side and chakra walked halfway down the dam. Opening a pouch she pulled out stacks of explosive notes. Taping them down to the dam she set five stacks in a large, 'X' pattern. She then leapt away to the ground.

In the five years she and her people had been fighting in the Third Great Ninja War she had learned two basic truths about the damn rock nins. One they were tough bastards, say what you will they knew how to fight. And two, whether it was a fortress a building or a dam they really knew how to build. Of course building something well didn't matter if you couldn't protect it.

"Time to get a little more payback," she formed a hand sign. "Kai!"

The five stacks of notes blew with a single loud roar, tearing five holes into the concrete dam. Almost instant cracks spread them and giant slabs were thrown out as the five small holed became one huge one. She stood there watching and listening as panicked shouts came from inside the dam as worker and guards were shouting and running about trying to figure out what was going on. As they did so more cracks began spreading out with an ominous snapping sound. The dam began to shake and pieces began splitting off and falling into the river below. It held together for a bout two

more minutes before the top third suddenly gave way with a massive crash.

She got moving as she could hear the water pouring out behind her. About twenty little villages and towns were about to be flooded out. Earth country would have to deal with about thirty thousand homeless refugees and all the crops in the valley would of course be lost. The people of earth were going to be a little hungrier now.

She would have much preferred slaughtering another enemy army as her father had done, but this was a victory in its own way. She had hurt the damn rock nins and made things harder for them. For Kushina that was more than enough. Now she just needed to get through fifty miles of enemy territory and make it home alive.

---

It was late afternoon the following day when she finally made it back. Entering the village she lowered the black ninja mask all ANBU wore when on duty. (Similar to the mask worn by Kakashi.) ANBU captain Uzumaki Kushina had made it through yet another dangerous mission. She relaxed a bit and headed home, she figured she would make it back in time for dinner. Walking along the street she received many friendly greetings and words. These she acknowledged with a nod or quick thanks. Like her father, like her uncle Saishu, and like Urusai she was now seen as one of the geniuses that her clan seemed to produce so regularly. At 17 not only was she an ANBU captain she was also a fifth level blade master. She was trusted with the most difficult and important of missions and was one of the most highly respected ninja in the village.

She had also finally gotten boobs.

Her body had finally filled out and the young men of the village had started to notice her for reasons that had nothing to do with her ninja skills. She had actually gotten to fulfill an old dream from her academy days when she had been asked out by the class heart throb Aguri. He'd taken her out on her first ever date and wound up

giving her, her very first kiss. When they'd started going out all her old feelings from her academy days had come rushing back and she had been in heaven. She had been thrilled just to know that in the end he had finally picked her.

But then as the newness of the situation passed she made a horrifying discovery. She didn't like him! It turned out he was self centered and boring and unwilling to acknowledge she was a better ninja. He complained that she was too tomboyish, that she spoke her mind too much and was too aggressive about things. He even complained that she wore her hair short. What he wanted a quiet supportive girlfriend with long hair. That was when she informed him that what she wanted was a man who was secure enough to be with a strong woman without feeling threatened. She wound up dumping him after about a month.

Sadly that had been the longest relationship she'd had. She'd gone out with a few other boys, but none of them had lasted longer than a week. None of them seemed interested in anything more than groping her. And while that was fun she wanted a bit more. She had kissed and fooled around a bit but was still a virgin, and she wasn't expecting that to change anytime soon. With the war going on she figured she would just have to wait before she tried to date seriously.

---

When she got home her mother had greeted her with her usual overexcitement. Since losing her brother her mother had started to become noticeably greyer. She worried about her and Temjin and always made a huge fuss when either of them came home from a mission or tour at the front. Her mother was not ninja but she had her own fears to deal with.

With the clan gathered for dinner they discussed the news about the war. Since her mission was declassified Kushina was happy to tell them all about flooding the Verda valley. That cheered everyone; there was nothing better than hearing about a victory against earth. Over the last year there had been many raids into earth country. Villages had been burned and bridges blown up. Despite the

numbers advantage Iwa held they did not have enough ninja to defend every important spot.

"You know I'm starting to wonder how many of their people we have to kill or make homeless for the damn rock nins to get the message." Kushina said.

"How about a million?" Her uncle Saishu said morosely. "We didn't give up because some of our people died, they won't either."

"If we'd have given up we'd have lost everything," Kushina pointed out. "They could make peace with us tomorrow and not lose a single inch."

"They would lose everything they've taken from us in this war." Saishu answered solemnly.

"That land belongs to us not them!" She said hotly.

Saishu grinned a bit. "No need to yell at me niece, I agree with you. It's the Tsuchikage you need to yell at."

"If they won't give back what they've stolen we'll just have to take it back by force."

Saishu nodded. "And how do we do that without losing half our people storming those fortresses? They may be weaker than they were before but they're still strong enough to turn any attack into a blood bath."

Kushina frowned but couldn't come up with a real answer. She finally settled with saying. "I'm sure there's a way."

"Well, be sure to tell us when you figure what that way is."

While listening Naoko smiled and said nothing.

Besides her blowing the dam there had been no other noteworthy events on the local front so talk turned to news from far away. It

looked as though the Lightning attempt to overrun the village hidden in the Mist was ending in failure. For the past three years the Raikage's armies had been slowly pushing closer to Bloody Mist. Word was they had gotten within just fifteen miles. But then Mist's fleet had captured the supply port of Queto. That had left the Lightning army in a barren and hostile country without food or supplies. So three years of bitter fighting had been completely wasted as the Cloud nin were forced to retreat.

There were reports of riots in Suna. Since the disappearance of the Third Kazekage the Council of Wind was trying to continue the war against Leaf. It looked as though they were failing miserably. Even before with their Kazekage the forces of wind had been getting hammered. Now with the Kazekage missing and assumed dead many in Suna had lost all will to fight. If the sand nins did finally make peace that would be a huge help to their allies in Konoha and free up troops and resources for fighting earth.

Leaf's war with Earth hadn't been going well. There'd been a huge battle in Rain country just a couple months ago where a large Leaf army and an even bigger Earth / Rain army had fought to mutual annihilation. Over a thousand ninja combined had died. In fact according to rumor there had been a total of just four survivors; Rain's leader Hanzo, her dear friend Tsunade, Jiraiya, and their teammate Orochimaru. If the story was to be believed Hanzo had deliberately spared them to honor their courage and strength at having survived. He'd also given them a new title that seemed to be getting popular, the Sannin.

The fighting in Rain had petered out; both sides were exhausted and incapable of any more offensive action. But in Grass the damn rock nins were still on the attack. There a large rock army was mounting what was looking like a serious effort to finally annex Grass and push into Fire country. The Leaf / Grass forces were being pushed steadily back. It was looking like Earth's advantage in numbers was finally coming into play. If Earth could somehow conquer Leaf then everything that had happened in Whirlpool would be meaningless.



The whole of the elemental lands would be open to conquest by the damn rock nins.

Despite the gloomy turn in the conversation Naoko remained upbeat. "Kushina after dinner I need to talk to you."

Her mother immediately turned an upset look on him. "You're not giving her another dangerous mission are you? She just got back! Give her at least a little time to rest."

"Mom," Kushina said. "If the village needs me I'm happy to go." She looked at her father eagerly. "Is it another important mission?"

He nodded to her. "It's important but not dangerous." He looked at all his clan who were seated having dinner. "I've just received word from the Hokage; we'll be receiving reinforcements from Leaf." Naoko smiled at the excitement those words brought.

Saishu found it hard to believe. "Their sending us ninja? Are you absolutely sure?"

"I have the message from the Hokage himself."

"How many ninja?" Kushina asked eagerly. "And is Tsunade among them?"

"I have no idea how many or if Tsunade is among them. But the Hokage deliberately mentioned that these forces would help us clear out the enemy from our land."

"Clear the enemy from our land?" Saishu repeated. "Does the Hokage understand the damn rock nins have built a line of fortresses?"

"He does," Naoko confirmed. "But those were his exact words in the message; this force will help us clear the enemy from our land."

"We would need at least a couple hundred more ninja for an attack to even have a reasonable chance of working and not ending in

slaughter." Saishu said carefully. "Do you really think the Hokage would give us that many?"

"They will only be here a few weeks," Naoko said. "Perhaps he feels they can be spared long enough to do us some good." He looked at his daughter. "Kushina, you will meet the Leaf nins on the east road on the border with Waterfall. You'll guide them here and I want you to personally escort their commander."

"I'll be happy to," Kushina said. She was looking forward to meeting some more Leaf nins.

---

Before leaving the village she had a ritual she always performed. She bought a single white chrysanthemum and brought it to a section of the village wall. High up on the wall, carved in large blocks were the words, 'They died so others might live.' Below that were hundreds of names carved much smaller. One of the names was Uzumaki Shinzou. She reached out and gently touched the name carved into the stone. She then placed her flower down. She did this every single time she left the village.

---

She stood out in the middle of the east road waiting. Once this road had been filled with wagons and with travelers as trade had flowed freely across the border. Now in war time it was empty except for the occasional patrol. So when she saw four people running along it she knew it had to be the advance of the Leaf reinforcements. As they approached her she remained right out in the open and hoped that they weren't somehow a squad of rock nins.

When they got close she was very surprised to see that three of them were just kids. One a cute little girl with dark brown hair and a couple marks drawn on her cheeks. One was a boy with black hair and some yellow goggles. One was a boy with some crazy silver colored hair and a ninja mask draped over most of his face. But most of her attention was focused on their sensei. He was wearing black pants and a black shirt beneath a green flack jacket. He had long

spiky hair and the deepest blue eyes. He offered her a dazzling smile that made her heart flutter. *What a good looking man! Yummy! Come to mamma!*

All four of them were wearing leaf hitai-ites, and since they didn't attack her it seemed safe to say they really were leaf nins. She gave them all a polite bow. "Welcome to Whirlpool country, I am Uzumaki Kushina and will be your escort to the village."

"They only sent one ninja to escort us?" The boy with the silver hair sounded offended. "Do you even know who we are?"

Kushina looked at him with a gentle smile. "Well I know *you* are a rude little boy," she said pleasantly.

The boy with the goggles snorted laughter which earned him a dark look from the rude kid. The little girl just looked embarrassed. Their sensei intervened putting his hand on the boy's head mussing his silver hair. "Now, now, Kakashi we're here as guests and as allies. Let's try and remember that." Their sensei then looked at her with that smile of his. "I apologize."

"Oh I forgive you," she said. "So how long before the rest of your men come up?"

"Uh, rest?" He sounded a bit embarrassed.

"That's right; I assume you and your squad are the advance scouts. How far back are the rest of the reinforcements?"

He scratched the back of his head and *really* looked embarrassed. "Uh, I think there's been a little misunderstanding. My squad is the reinforcement."

Kushina stared at him and blinked for a second before she could formulate a response.

"WHAT?!" All four leaf nin jumped back a step. "Your Hokage promised us he would send a force to clear the damn rock nins out of our territory. Is this some kind of joke?"

"There's no need to worry!" The boy with the goggles said. "Sensei's the best! With him here we can't possibly lose!"

She sighed and reminded herself not to get too angry, it was their Hokage's fault not theirs. "I'm sure he is, but one man can't beat an army... well not unless he has a really powerful summons." She looked at him hopefully. "Do you?"

He nodded. "As a matter of fact I do, but I don't think I'll need Gamabunta for this."

"You obviously don't know who you're talking to," the arrogant kid (Kakashi?) said. He pointed proudly to his sensei. "This is the one and only Namikaze Minato, the legendary Yellow Flash of Konoha."

She looked again and gawked. " *You're* the Yellow Flash? The one the damn rock nins have a retreat on sight order for?"

He began blushing; she thought it made him look even cuter. "Yes that would be me."

"Well, any man who can put that kind of fear into the damn rock nins is definitely someone I want to get to know better." She leaned back just a little to help emphasize her breast. "Maybe if you play your cards right I'll let you take me out on a date."

Minato stammered out some sort of answer as the boy with goggles laughed and the little girl shook her head.

Silver hair gave her an annoyed look. "You may as well quit trying to flirt with him. Every girl in Konoha has chased after him with no result."

"That's fine," she said pleasantly. "I'm not a girl from Konoha." She gave Minato a sly little wink and then turned down the road. "Now come on, let me take you to Whirlpool."

---

As they followed the beautiful and outspoken kunoichi Minato found he couldn't take his eyes off of her. She was definitely different from any other girl he'd ever met.

## A sleepless night

As they were running back towards Whirlpool Minato pulled up beside Kushina.

"You said your name was Uzumaki. I suppose that means you're related to the village headman Uzumaki Naoko?"

She nodded happily. "He's my dad. So I guess you had better be nice to me huh?"

He gave her that huge and playful smile. "How else would I treat such a beautiful woman?"

As she was running she stumbled and damn near fell. Without thinking Minato's hand reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her and keep her from falling. Once she'd regained her balance she looked over and realized he was touching her. Her heart began to throb and she could feel her cheeks darken.

Seeing her staring at his hand he let go of her. "Sorry."

"Ah, no problem." She looked down a little embarrassed. "By the way, about your comment that you think I'm beautiful."

"Yes?"

She looked back over at him with an amused grin. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

He laughed and so did she.

---

The three kids were trailing about ten yards behind. They couldn't hear what was being said, but it was obvious the two of them were having a pleasant talk.

Seeing the way his sensei was smiling and laughing along with their red headed guide Kakashi released an annoyed sigh. There was no one in the world he respected and admired more than his sensei. But there were still times he wished he would just behave a little more seriously.

"Why is sensei encouraging her?" He asked aloud. "It's so beneath him, he should be more dignified."

"I think sensei likes her," Rin sounded a little dreamy.

Kakashi sniffed at that. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"What's so ridiculous?" Obito asked. "I mean did you see her? She's hot!"

Kakashi looked over at his teammate and rolled his eyes. "You sound like Jiraiya. There are more important things than physical appearance."

"Name one," Obito challenged.

"How about her family and whether or not she has a bloodline limit? Sensei is the last of his line. If he wants to be with someone he should look for a woman who can give him strong children."

"Strong children?" Obito made a face. "What does that have to do with falling in love? You love who you love and that's all there is to it!" He glanced over at Rin and saw she was nodding agreement with him.

"That's true," Rin said quietly. "You love who you love." She looked over to Kakashi shyly.

He didn't notice. "Whatever, it's not like it matters any. If sensei wants to fool around a little I guess it's not important."

"I don't know," Obito said. "I've never seen Minato-sensei pay so much attention to a girl before. Maybe they'll end up falling in love."

Kakashi looked over at his teammate and scowled beneath his mask. "Idiot."

---

Kushina took them to the village and then led them directly to the Uzumaki compound where her father was waiting to greet them. At first he was quite disappointed to find out only four ninja had been sent. His disappointment was somewhat alleviated when he learned the person in front of him was none other than the famous Yellow Flash of Konoha. But only somewhat.

"The message I received from your Hokage led me to believe your force would be strong enough to help us liberate all our territory. I must confess to being a little disappointed Minato-san." Naoko told him.

"Please just call me Minato," he said. "Unfortunately our forces are stretched a bit thin at the moment. I'm afraid that my squad and I were all that could be spared. But from what I've learned about the situation here I should be able to deal with things."

Naoko raised an eyebrow. "The way you just said that it sounds like you expect to beat them single handed."

Minato rubbed the back of his head and looked embarrassed. "Ah, well, I do."

"Oh really?" Kushina purred. She walked up and playfully rubbed herself against him in a way that caused his arm to brush against her breast. Seeing his face turn red he had definitely noticed. "No matter how awesome a fighter you may be they won't come out and face you in the open. They'll stay inside their stronghold and make you come to them. Do you really think you can take out a fortress filled with rock nins all by yourself?"

"Well, I have done it before," Minato said.



She smiled and rubbed herself against him once more. She thought the look of panic on his face absolutely adorable. "Well then, if you can actually do it you can take me out to dinner."

"Really?" Minato said eagerly. "All right, but I'm going to hold you to that."

Listening to all this and seeing his only daughter performing such antics right in front of him Naoko looked at her with mild horror. But he declined to say anything in front of their honored guest.

---

The four leaf nins were of course given rooms in the Uzumaki main house. As the clan gathered for dinner they were treated as honored guests and asked many questions about Konoha, the Hokage, and about their experiences in this vast war. Kakashi's answers were blunt and short while the others seemed willing enough to talk. Obito especially enjoyed telling everyone about his many great and heroic deeds... until Kakashi called him a liar and nearly started a fight. Minato was forced to intervene with his two students to keep the peace.

When the dinner was ready to be served Minato and his students were seated at the main table to Naoko's right, the place of honor. Both Naoko and his wife were surprised that as they were sitting down Kushina was still nowhere to be seen. She had quietly slipped away as most of the clan had been interrogating Minato and his students. He was about to send someone upstairs to check on her when she made her appearance. All the talk in the dining room came to an abrupt halt.

Normally when Kushina ate she'd be in the black and red as often as not. The rest of the time she would just put on whatever clothes were at hand. As she came bouncing down the stairs she was in a very tight little orange dress. It came up to the top of her thighs and was low cut in the front so as to reveal a spectacular amount of cleavage. She had on bright pink lipstick and an expensive perfume that she only used for special occasions. She strutted over to her normal seat

(which was across from Minato's) and sat down, pretending all the while not to notice all the attention she was getting.

From the second he spotted her coming down the stairs Minato had not been able to look away. He was not inexperienced when it came to women. He'd always been considered good looking, and growing up not only as heir to the Namikaze clan but as a prodigy meant he'd always had fan girls. He'd basically had his pick of any girl in the village. He'd also had every single clan try and arrange a marriage with him. At 19 he was already well experienced when it came to being with women. He wasn't anywhere near as bad as Jiraiya-sensei; he never promised anything more than he was willing to give. The women he was with were never just warm bodies to him; he treated them with kindness and gentleness. He'd had several girlfriends with the longest relationship lasting six months. But even though he'd known girls he'd cared for and liked he'd never found anyone he thought he could love. He was wondering if...

"You're drooling."

"Wha... what?" Minato suddenly snapped out of his thoughts. He realized he was straining open mouthed at Kushina who was now seated across from him.

Trying very hard not to laugh She reached over and gently lifted his jaw so he was no longer gaping at her. "There, that's much better."

---

The two of them spent the entire meal engrossed in conversation. All of his attention was focused on her while she made sure to keep their talk light and entertaining. Other people who tried to enter their conversations were given short shrift. Kushina was definitely not going to share. The way the two of them were focusing on each other was obvious to everyone whether ninja or not. Most seemed to find it rather entertaining, Kushina usually wasn't the one to do the chasing. A few, particularly Kakashi, seemed annoyed with the situation.

Naoko was very careful to hide what he was thinking. Truthfully he was amazed that his daughter would behave this way right in front of her own family. Kushina had never been one to be shy or to not share her thoughts. But she had also never been this brazen or shameless right in front of him. He knew she was a strong woman and an adult, but she was always going to be his little girl. And seeing her behavior was making him very uncomfortable.

He still remembered returning home to find two of his nieces sneaking out of Jiraiya's room. The fact that Minato was Jiraiya's student did not make him feel better about the situation. And just as with Jiraiya he felt he had to be very careful with how he dealt with things. His clan could take offense easily and he did not want any unpleasantness between his kin and his guests from the Leaf.

---

That night, well after everyone else was asleep, Kushina silently lifted her bedroom window and carefully began to chakra walk along the side of the house. She had on a very large cotton shirt that came down halfway to her knees. She knew which room Minato was staying in and was planning to pay him a little visit. She had no intention at all of actually *doing* anything. She wasn't that sort of girl; if she had been she wouldn't still be a virgin. But she thought it would be fun to maybe tease him a little. Mostly she just wanted to talk to him some more. He was so interesting and so intelligent! And his eyes were such an incredible shade of blue. She thought she could be happy to just spend the whole night staring into those incredible eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"Wha?!" Hearing her uncle's voice she jumped about startled and lost her concentration. She'd have fallen to the ground except for her uncle grabbing her wrist and yanking her back up.

"You all right?" Saishu asked calmly.

She sent chakra back into the soles of her feet and reattached herself to the house. "Fine, I'm fine now." Getting over her momentary surprise she looked at her uncle who was in clan battledress and looking back at her calmly enough. "Uncle what are you doing here?"

" I am acting as a guard to make sure nothing disturbs our honored guests. My brother asked me to take care of this personally." He gave his niece a knowing look. "And just what are *you* doing Kushina?"

She felt embarrassed at the way her uncle was looking at her. It reminded her of when she'd been caught stealing cookies when she was six. "Ah, I couldn't sleep."

"So naturally you decided to take a chakra walk in the direction if a certain leaf nin's room?"

"Heh, is his room this way? I had no idea."

Saishu didn't say a word.

"Ah, I think I'll go back to bed now."

"That would be good," her uncle said. "And thank you Kushina, you just won me a thousand ryu."

"What are you talking about?"

"Your father believed if anything happened tonight it would be the leaf nin's doing. But I had faith in you."

"The two of you made a bet?" Kushina sounded deeply offended.

"I wouldn't worry about that. If I were you I'd be much more worried about what your father is going to say to you in the morning after I tell him about your sleepless night."

"Oh uncle Saishu couldn't we keep this a secret?" She brought her hands together as if in prayer and looked at him with big puppy dog eyes.

He gave her a comforting smile. "What, and not collect on my bet?"

"But..."

"Get some sleep Kushina," her uncle told her. "I think tomorrow is going to be a very long day for you."

## Someone different

The following morning Kushina was not exactly surprised when her father intercepted her on the way to breakfast and asked her to come to his study for a chat.

Just as soon as the door closed she flopped down into a chair and sighed. "I know what this is about," she said. "I want you to know I was just playing a little joke on our guest."

Naoko frowned at his daughter as he took his own seat behind his desk. "And this joke involved sneaking into his room in nothing but a shirt?"

"It was a really big shirt," she mumbled beneath her breath.

He stared at her for a long moment with those knowing eyes of his. "Kushina, what are you thinking?"

"What?" She said defensively. "I'm just playing with him a little. It's just a bit of harmless fun."

"Kushina," he said seriously. "I know you have dated before this, but I have never seen this kind of behavior from you."

She grinned at him. "Well, we never had such a hot guy staying here before."

The mental image of his two nieces sneaking out of Jiraiya's room came immediately to mind. "Are you sure you only want to joke with him?"

She looked at her father in surprise. "What the hell does that mean? Father do you really think I would... well..."

"Sleep with him?" Naoko said flatly. "No more than I ever believed you would try and sneak into his room." He saw his daughter blush

and knew he had scored a very big hit. "I want you to stop behaving like you have been. You are embarrassing the entire clan."

"How is it the clan's business if I want to show our guest a little extra attention?"

"I think you just struck a key word there Kushina. He is our guest. He is no local boy for you to flirt with. He is the head of a powerful clan from the strongest of the five great villages. He is only a visitor here and when his work is done he will return to the leaf. There is no possibility of any sort of future with him, so please give up whatever silly notion you have about that."

"I am good friends with Tsunade and Jiraiya," Kushina said.  
"Tsunade has even offered to let me stay in her home if I ever visit Konoha. You didn't object to me becoming friends with either of them."

You were twelve then, if you had been fifteen I would have definitely objected to you being anywhere near Jiraiya. "I am very glad that you became friends to those two. If you wish to be friends with our current guests that would also be welcome. But do not think of anything beyond friendship." He shook his head. "Do you think you are going to marry a clan head from Konoha?"

She snorted. "Don't be ridiculous, I like Minato but I'm not in love with him."

"Then please behave properly around him for the rest of his stay."

---

Following a quick breakfast she went out into the courtyard. It being a normal day there were many young children scattered throughout learning various lessons on taijutsu and swordsmanship from their elders. She spotted a small gathering and headed that way. She was not surprised to see Minato was the one in the middle of the crowd. She pushed her way to the front to see that he was sparring uncle Saishu. Her uncle was much better when he had a sword in his

hand, but was still very good in hand to hand. Minato seemed to be able to match his best efforts with no trouble at all. He blocked every punch and kick with fluid grace and snapped back with a lightning fast counter. He was beautiful just to watch. Every movement was perfect and as he fought it almost looked like an effortless dance. Every move was also delivered with obvious strength and speed. She was certain that beneath that cloak and vest was a rippled chest. She was sure his arms and shoulders were all firm muscle. She could just imagine what he would look like without all those clothes on. She suddenly imagined running into him 'accidentally' as he stepped out of the shower. Him wet and steaming, the water just running off that hard body of his, with nothing but a towel on. He would look at her with that wonderful big smile of his and come over to her. He would grab a hold of her with those strong hands and pull her body tightly up against his. She would feel his hot breath against her neck and the warmth of his body pressed to hers. Then he would look at her with those amazing blue eyes and say...

"You're drooling."

"Huh?! What?" Kushina looked about in a panic until she spotted Minato's student with the crazy silver hair standing next to her. Despite the mask he had on she could tell he was looking up at her with annoyance.

"I said you're drooling. You remind me of one of my nin dogs when I put a steak out."

She frowned at the rude little ninja. "It's Kakashi right? Anyone ever tell you you're really annoying?"

"Yeah, I tell him that all the time." Obito said. Kushina hadn't even notice the three of them standing near her. "You should just ignore him, he's always a jerk."

Kakashi glared at his teammate with yellow goggles. "Just because people don't want here it doesn't make it any less true. Anyway, who cares what the crybaby Uchiha thinks?"



"Stuck up jerk!" Obito growled.

"Crybaby."

The two of them squared off but Rin slid in between giving them both a weary grin. Kushina got the sense the girl did this a lot. "Come on you two, you know sensei will be mad if you fight."

Obito frowned but nodded. "I guess so, it's not like he's worth it."

"As though it would even be a fight," Kakashi said dismissively. Obito growled but Rin dragged him away while sending Kakashi an exasperated look.

"I see you get along well with your teammates," Kushina noted dryly.

"I get along fine with Rin, as for Obito who cares? He's a weakling and a complete screw up. If he weren't an Uchiha he probably wouldn't even be a ninja."

His description reminded her of her cousin Daiichi and of her old team. "Listen, you can't just ignore teammates because they may be weaker than you. If you happen to be better at some things you should do everything you can to protect and help your teammate."

From beneath his mask Kakashi frowned up at her. "I'm not taking any advice from some fan girl."

She bent her hips and shoved her face into his. "Excuuuse me? I am nobody's fan girl!"

"Does that mean you drool at every guy you see?" Kakashi shot back, not looking the least bit intimidated. "Look, you may as well stop flirting with him and embarrassing yourself. I've told you this before; every girl in Konoha has chased after sensei and gotten nowhere."

Annoyed that the boy didn't have enough sense to be intimidated she stood straight again. "And I think I told you that I'm not a girl from

Konoha."

"Do you even know who it is you're trying to flirt with?" Kakashi asked. "Minato-sensei is the absolute best! Not just as a ninja but as a man, he is the finest person I have ever known. He's a ninja legend who has invented his own jutsus and never lost a single fight or battle! He is the Yellow Flash of Konoha and the sole member of the great Namikaze clan. And there is even talk that the Third Hokage is considering him as his successor." Kakashi stared up at her certain all that would be enough to scare her off.

She simply smiled. "It's o.k., I won't hold any of that against him."

Beneath his mask Kakashi was open mouthed.

"Good morning Kushina," Minato said as he approached her. "You look lovely today."

She looked up to see that he was smiling at her. She felt her face blush and gave him a welcoming smile of her own. "Thanks, you're looking pretty manly yourself Minato-kun." She said to him sweetly. When she saw his cheeks darken a bit she felt very pleased. Hah, hah, score one for me.

Kakashi of course felt the need to ruin the moment. "Sensei, aren't we supposed to go to the front line today and take a look at the target?"

Minato looked at his student and nodded. "Ah, that's right. In fact we'll be doing that right now. Uzumaki Saishu will be our guide."

"What?" Kushina looked over to her uncle. "Oh uncle, didn't father mention to you that he wanted me to guide them?"

He immediately gave her a suspicious glance. "No he didn't, and after last night..."

"Oh I explained all that to him this morning," she said cheerfully. "After hearing my argument he decided that I should act as Minato's guide for the rest of his stay."

"Oh really?" Saishu lifted an eyebrow. "Why do I find that hard to believe?"

"Oh uncle! Do you think I would lie to you?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

She looked hurt. "Well if you don't believe your own niece why not just ask him? He's sitting down to breakfast right now."

"And you'll wait right here?" he asked doubtfully. She nodded her head and gave him a look of such pure innocence that it made him nervous. He glanced to Minato. "Would you mind waiting just one minute?"

"No problem," Minato said. His other two students had gathered at his side.

With a last warning look for Kushina Saishu hurried into the main house.

The second the door closed she grabbed a hold of Minato's wrist. "Well come on!" She began to running for the compound entrance dragging a surprised Minato with her. The three students were caught off guard but ran after them.

Minato looked over to her as he began to run alongside. "You're not supposed to be my guide today are you?"

She looked over to him and winked. "Nope."

He tried very hard not to laugh as he realized she was, 'kidnapping' him. "Won't you get in trouble for this?"

"Probably," she laughed. "Now come on slow poke, I don't want any one catching us before we get out of the village." She ran faster trying to leave him in her dust.

Smiling he pushed to keep up with her without leaving her in his dust. He looked at her happy carefree face and felt something he never had before. She certainly is different; I think I'd really like to get to know her better.

# The Yellow Flash

The five of them made it out of the village without anyone noticing and were then headed to the front and the main Iwa fortress. Since the front was not very far away, and since she suspected she would not get another chance like this she deliberately slowed their pace and took the long way. If Minato noticed he did not seem to mind. He and Kushina stayed side by side while his three students trailed about twenty yards behind out of ear shot.

"So I hear you're going to be the next Hokage of your village," Kushina said.

Minato looked embarrassed and rubbed the back of his head. "Which of my students told you that?"

"The one with the stick up his ass." Kushina said with a grin.

"Heh, I see Kakashi has made a real impression on you. If he seems a little rude at times please forgive him. He's a fine ninja and will probably be getting promoted to Jonin soon. He's just a little obsessed with following rules and with appearances." Minato chuckled a little. "Actually I just wish there were some jutsu to give Kakashi a little of Obito's light heart and give Obito a little of Kakashi's determination."

"Actually I don't think very much of Kakashi," she said sourly. "Even if he has some skills he obviously doesn't care about his teammate. A ninja should always care about his fellows."

Minato looked at her with a trace of sadness. "I'm afraid I can't go into it but there are reasons why he cares so much about rules and trying to be a perfect ninja in all things. I've tried teaching him to be more tolerant of the failings of others, but that lesson hasn't quite gotten through yet. Hopefully he'll figure it out eventually."

Minato looked away, obviously signaling he did not want to discuss this matter any further. They traveled for a little while in silence as Kushina tried to come up with a new topic of conversation.

"Anyway it's not true," Minato suddenly said.

She was caught a bit off guard. "What's not?"

"Me becoming Hokage, that's not going to happen. It *is* true that the Third Hokage said I would be a worthy successor, but that was just polite conversation. Anyway, everyone in the village already knows who the fourth Hokage will be."

"Well since I'm not from your village can you tell me? Or is it a state secret?"

He grinned at her. "It's no secret. Sarutobi intends his favorite student Orochimaru to succeed him."

The name was vaguely familiar to her. "Wait, he's the teammate of Jiraiya and Tsunade right?" Minato nodded.

"That's right; together the three of them are being called the Sannin. They are all three of them amazing ninja. Of course I'm a bit biased towards my sensei."

"Of course," Kushina agreed. "So what's so great about this Orochimaru?"

"He's a genius," Minato said. "Our Hokage was nicknamed the professor as he not only learned every general use jutsu in the Leaf village he also created more than a dozen original jutsus. He swears that Orochimaru has the finest mind he has ever known and that he will surpass him one day. Orochimaru is a great ninja and will make a great Hokage. Although..."

"Yes?" She asked curiously.

"There's something about him that, well, is a little disturbing at times. He has this way of looking at people like they were rats rather than human beings. And knowing him he seems a little too willing to sacrifice others to achieve his ends. Certainly as ninja we must be prepared to make sacrifices when necessary. But a leader should weigh carefully just when such sacrifices are absolutely necessary, rather than being expedient. To a Hokage the lives of his ninja and people must be more precious to him than his own. He should see himself as serving their needs, not the other way around. I sometimes think that Orochimaru would..." He suddenly stopped again. He noticed that Kushina looked very interested in what he was saying. "Heh, sorry about that. I don't know what I'm saying. The Hokage knows him better than anyone, I trust Sarutobi's judgment."

"No need to apologize," Kushina said. "You're obviously very passionate about protecting your village and your people." She sent him an admiring look. "You sound a little like my father when he talks about our village." She liked the sudden blush that touched his cheeks. *What a cutie!*

"Well... thanks, but anyway I'll never be Hokage. Just trying to revive my clan will be challenging enough."

"That's right; Mr. personality mentioned something about you being the last of the Namikaze."

Minato nodded. "True, I am, so at some point, If I survive this war, I'll have to marry and start having children." He chuckled a bit. "Actually I may just have to have three wives."

"Three? Well my, my, my aren't you a stud!" She began teasing him. "You really think you're going to be able to satisfy three women?"

"To be honest I'm not sure, but for the good of the clan I'm willing to make the sacrifice."

Kushina laughed. "Sacrifice! Oh please! Sounds more like a teenage boy's fantasy. I can't even imagine what sort of women would be o.k.

with actually sharing a husband. I mean I don't even like sharing my ninja gear."

He looked at her highly amused. "Does that mean you wouldn't be interested?"

"Hell no!" She snorted and rolled her eyes. "Like I said I'm not good with sharing what's mine. Besides, I should be more than enough for any man."

"Even me?" Minato looked at her and his interest suddenly seemed just a little more... intense.

*Is he being serious? Even just a little?* "Minato-kun," she said sweetly. "The question isn't whether or not I'd be enough. The question is if I'd be too much."

---

Despite her best efforts she eventually brought them to the front lines nearest the main enemy fortress. They arrived at a hill about a mile and a half from the fortress. From where they were they had a clear view. Minato and Kakashi both took out binoculars to get better views.

After a couple minutes of studying the structure Kakashi lowered his binoculars and gave his assessment. "Hill top stone fortress, no visible gate, four corner towers, local stone construction, fifty yard high walls, with reports indicating a garrison likely numbering under five hundred." He glanced at Kushina. "In other words nothing really special."

The smug way he said that annoyed the absolute hell out of her. "Listen you cocky brat, that fortress is a deathtrap. It's heavily manned and its walls are resistant to both physical damage and jutsus. If we tried to take it we would lose hundred of our best nin."

"I'm sure that *your* ninja probably see it that way," Kakashi said dismissively.



She was about to reply when Minato coughed slightly and lowered his binoculars. "That fortress is a formidable obstacle Kakashi. The Whirl pool nin were right to be worried about it."

Kakashi immediately lowered his head embarrassed. "Hai, sensei." He muttered.

Kushina grinned. *Nice to see he at least respects someone's opinion.* She turned to Minato, who was taking a scroll out of a pouch. "Still think you can take that place alone?"

He smiled at her. "Yes actually." He performed a hand sign. With a puff of smoke the scroll was transformed into ten belts filled the hundreds of strange looking kunai.

"What are you doing? She asked curiously.

Looking at her he gave her one of his big smiles. "Remember when you said you'd have dinner with me if I could take out their fortress single handed?"

"Sure."

"Mind if I add a condition?"

She lifted an eyebrow. "What do you have in mind?"

"You have to wear the same outfit you wore to dinner last night."

Laughing she answered. "Minato-kun, honey, if you can take that fortress down I'll go to dinner with you **naked** if you want."

He stared at her for a moment and hesitated before shaking his head. "Be glad I'm not my sensei." He ran through some hand signs. " **Kage Bushin no Jutsu.**" A thick pall of smoke filled the air around them. When it cleared there were twenty copies of Minato standing there. As she watched the clones began picking up the belts and dividing up the kunai among them.

"O.k. just what the hell are you up to?" She asked him.

The twenty clones took off in the direction of the fortress while the original took his binoculars back out to watch their progress. "I told you, I'm taking out that fortress."

She stared at him. "Minato I appreciate a good joke as much as anyone, but aren't you taking this a little too far? No matter how many kunai with explosive tags you throw at that thing you won't do any serious damage. At best you may take out one or two Iwa nin before your shadow clones get wiped out."

"Those kunai don't have any explosive notes attached," he said as he continued to watch through the binoculars.

"Then they're going to do even less damage," she said questioningly.

"Don't worry," he said. "This is just setting the stage."

Not sure what the hell he was talking about she took out her own binoculars to watch the bizarre attack. As she watched the twenty clones ran full speed up the hill at the fortress wall. A couple tripped the hundreds of mines planted throughout the hillside and promptly blew themselves up. As soon as the clones got in range they began tossing kunai up and over the wall and into the fortress courtyard. The Iwa nin were caught off guard by this sudden, and suicidal, attack in broad daylight. The immediate response was no more than a few poorly aimed kunai and jutsus. The clones easily avoided these and continued to rain kunai into the fortress. But soon more Iwa nin were manning the wall and the clones began to disappear. In less than three minutes they were all gone.

Kushina sent a disappointed look at Minato. *That's it? That's all the great Yellow Flash of Konoha can do? Why would the Iwa nins have a retreat on sight order just for that?* "Sorry your attack failed."

He carefully put away his binoculars. He then took out one more of the weird looking kunai and tossed it tot eh ground at his feet. "That

wasn't the attack." Minato told her, suddenly as serious as any man about to wade into the killing fields. "The attack begins right now."

"Be sure to watch carefully or you'll miss it," Kakashi said.

Kushina was surprised to see not only Kakashi but Obito and Rin looking excited and confident.

Kushina looked back to Minato worried. "O.k., a joke's a joke, but you are **not** actually planning on attack that place by yourself are you?"

He looked at her, a slight grin touching his serious façade. "If you're worried about me, why don't you give me a kiss for luck?"

She stared at him. "You're serious?"

He nodded. "About the attack and about the kiss."

"You better kiss him or you'll feel guilty if anything happens to him," Obito called out grinning.

She hesitated, but then stepped up to him. She stepped up on her tip toes and placed a soft kiss on his cheek. She then whispered in his ear. "You had better not get killed or I am really going to be mad at you."

He grinned at her. "Be right back."

He disappeared in a flash of yellow.

---

Ryozo came up onto the battlements. "Report," he said harshly.

A ninja stood straight and answered. "We were attacked by twenty shadow clones. They merely threw in a vast number of kunai into the fort." The ninja handed his general one of the three pronged kunai.

"How many casualties?" Ryozo asked.

"No deaths, no injured, no casualties."

Ryozo nodded, it had been nothing but a pointless raid with clones. A raid that had accomplished nothing. "Very well then I..."

"General there's something else," the ninja said nervously.

"What?"

"The shadow clones, they... they all looked like... him."

"Him? Who?" Ryozo said in annoyance.

The other ninja swallowed. "The Yellow Flash," he whispered. Among Iwa nin just the name was enough to cause sweats and bad dreams. "Sir, should we carry on the retreat on sight order?"

Ryozo stared at the man. "Retreat?! Because of some clones that were hanged to look like our enemy? Are you a fool? The Yellow Flash isn't within a thou..."

Ryozo never got to finish his statement. The last thing he saw was a flash of yellow, flowed by a sudden pain in his chest, and darkness.

---

Kushina and every other Whirlpool nin in the area was on edge and wondering what was going on. Flashes of yellow light were coming from the fortress along with a long series of blood curdling screams. As they watched a handful Iwa nins leapt out of the towers and began running westward. She along with all her fellow ninja had no idea what was going on. The only ones who seemed at ease were Kakashi, Obito, and Rin. Kakashi even had a ninja training manual out and was reading.

"So, where will you and sensei be having dinner?" Rin asked. "Just so you know his favorite food is miso ramen."

Less than five minutes after leaving there was a yellow flash at the spot where he'd left his kunai. When Minato reappeared he was **drenched** in blood from his hands up past his elbows. When he spotted Kushina he gave her a tired grin. "It's over; the fortress is now empty of rock forces."

Kushina felt her jaw drop as she stared at him.

"So... how does tomorrow night sound?"

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Uzumaki Naoko was standing on the highest tower of what had been, until an hour before, Iwa's most powerful fortress. He had his brother Saishu and his daughter Kushina standing there with him. Together they were looking down into the courtyard where the bodies of about four hundred Iwa nin were being neatly stacked up prior to burial. He had already sent word back to the village announcing the victory and authorizing fireworks and a public feast in honor of this great victory. The war might not be over yet, but Iwa's presence in their country shortly would be. With the loss of their main fortress the rest of the enemy line would fall apart and the damn rock nins would soon be driven out completely.

He looked over to his daughter. "You know after what you pulled this morning I was planning to ground you."

"Can you ground an ANBU captain?" She asked.

He shook his head. "Do you remember what I told you in my study this morning?"

"Yes."

"Well forget it," he looked at her with complete seriousness. "You have my permission to marry him."

# Celebration

All across the village hidden within the whirlpool people could hear the rapid, 'popping' sounds as small explosions going off.

Considering the village had been in a state of war for the last four years this might have caused worry among the civilians and ninja alike. But tonight each little pop was received with 'oohs' and cries of joy. They were from the fireworks that were filling the night sky. The entire village was out in the streets celebrating the great victory and the fall of the enemy fortress. Wooden tables had been hastily set out and loaded down with free food and drink for all to share. The war was not over, there were still rock nins in their territory and Iwa was unlikely to offer them peace terms even after such a heinous defeat. As Village Headsman Uzumaki Naoko knew he would be busy tomorrow reminding everyone that the war was still on and that they had to get back to wartime conditions.

But that would be for tomorrow.

Just for tonight they would open up the food reserves. They would ignore the laws about public drunkenness. They would even wink at the fights and brawls that always came when there was so much free booze. This was not for celebration. A night to revel in the fact that their village *would* survive despite all the damn rock nins could do to them. The children were in the streets banging on pots and makeshift drums and shouting and playing ninja. The adults were drinking and eating and laughing and occasionally fighting. They were all looking up into the sky at the glorious showers of light that appeared in every color. And they were all drinking toasts to and singing the praises of one man. Namikaze Minato, the great Yellow Flash of Konoha. Word had spread like wildfire of how he had singlehandedly taken down the Iwa fortress. The description was so incredible that many people refused to believe it. Yet soon there was no denying that the fortress really was theirs and that Minato had been the one to take it. All through the streets cries of thank rang out as people shouted his name.

Amid the happy crowds were a pair of thirteen year old Leaf ninja. Their sensei had given them leave to enjoy themselves and Obito had not needed any additional encouragement. He sprinted to where those tabled were and was stuffing himself with rice balls and sweets. He was also getting some free beer and sake. (As in Konoha, a ninja was considered an adult the moment they put on the hitai-ite.) As soon as people saw his leaf head band he became the center of attention as people pleaded with him for stories about his sensei. Obito was happy to oblige, though his speech began to slur and his stories became more and more disjointed the more little cups of sake he had. Luckily Rin was there to take care of him. She was enjoying being in the middle of such a festive crowd and loved the fireworks. But she was there mostly to make sure Obito made it back in one piece.

Kakashi sniffed at the idea of going out and making a spectacle of himself. A proper ninja did not get drunk in public and make a fool of himself. Instead he did a bit of light training and then read some ninja training manuals until it was time for bed.

For his part the great hero of the hour also declined to go celebrate. Minato instead found a quiet spot on top of the Uzumaki clan main house where he could sit peacefully in the shadows and watch the fireworks. It wasn't that he didn't enjoy a good party. His students and many of his friends back home knew how much he loved to drink and dance and have a good time. It was just that he never really liked being the center of attention all that much. He couldn't really enjoy himself when all eyes were on him. So instead he was just going to enjoy the fireworks alone and then get to bed.

At least that was the plan.

His plan was defeated when a pretty red head popped over the edge of the roof and grinned at him. "Anybody ever tell you you're not an easy guy to find?" She promptly leapt up onto the roof. He saw she was still in her black and red bodysuit and that she had a rather larger bottle in one hand and a pair of drinking bowls in the other. "I

would have thought you'd be out there enjoying yourself." She came over and sat down next to him.

He smiled at the beautiful and oh so assertive woman. His plans for the evening were ruined, but he didn't really mind. "I'm enjoying myself just fine, especially now that I have you to keep me company."

She preened a little. "Ah flattery, keep it coming." She opened up her bottle and began filling one of the bowls. Just so you know this bottle is from my family's private stock. It's fifty year old Shingutu sake imported from Rice country." She handed him the bowl and began filling up the second. "So you had better enjoy it." When she'd filled the second bowl almost to the very top she gave Minato a toast. "To the Yellow Flash, a true ninja legend."

Minato lifted his own bowl in response. "To Uzumaki Kushina, a kounichi as bold as she is beautiful."

Her cheeks flushed just a little and she quickly brought the bowl to her lips, draining it in one long gulp. Seeing her go Minato did the same, emptying his in a single pull as well.

"Ooooooh! Now that's good!" Kushina said. She could feel her whole body heat up in response to the potent rice wine.

"Strong!" Minato agreed and held his bowl out again.

She began pouring him a refill. "Just so you know I plan on taking advantage of you."

He flashed her that big smile of his. "Only if I don't take advantage of you first."

They both laughed and took a second drink. The sake really was excellent; it slid smoothly down their throats and filled their bellies with fire.



"You know if you want I think the whole village would be happy to make you king," she was only half joking as she again filled their bowls.

"Thanks but I don't want to be king anymore than I want to be Hokage. All I really want is to just go home and start raising a family."

She giggled. "Sure, you probably just want to start playing around with three wives," she teased.

"Maybe," he admitted. "But first I need to find three women I can really love." The both downed another round.

"That won't be too hard for you," she began pouring again. "The brat keeps telling me how you have all the girls in Konoha chasing you. I'm sure you can pick any three you want. You should just line them up and pick the three with the nicest tits."

His face turned a shade redder than it had been. "It's not like that."

She rolled her eyes. "Sure it's not."

"It's not," Minato said sharply and put down his bowl. "My father was killed on a mission to River country when I was nine. I don't have any other family. I'm not looking for just sex, that's easy enough to get. I want love, I want someone I can really love and have a family with." He brought the bowl up and drank.

Kushina did too, emptying her bowl and refilling it. Her mind was staring to get a little foggy. For some reason she was feeling kind of angry at him. "That's what you say, that's what men say, then what do you do? You go after the girl with the best looks and try and sleep with her."

"I'm not like that," Minato said defensively.

"Yeah right," Kushina snorted.

"I'm not."

She glared at him. "Then why do you need three wives huh? True love is hard to find, you think you'll find it three times? If it's real love you want one woman should be enough for you! You should find one woman who really, really loves you and just be with her." She swallowed another drink, not noticing as she spilled some down her chin.

"Do you have someone in mind?" Minato took another drink as well.

"Sure," she mumbled. "She's a kounichi from this tiny little village in the middle of nowhere. She really, really has fallen for you. But she's not good enough for you to marry though, right? I mean why would the great Namikaze Minato settle for someone like that?" She set the bottle down and lay on the roof. She didn't want any more sake. She just wanted to look up at the fireworks. "I know what I am," she said quietly. "I'm just a little diversion for you. I'm just a way to pass the time while you're stuck out here."

Minato put down his empty bowl and decided to lie down next to her. They were both lying next to one another looking up at the fireworks.

"I want to make a confession," Minato said. "When I came here I was hoping to meet you."

"What?" She looked over at him.

He turned his face to look at her. "Sensei didn't really mention you, though he did tell me about two of your cousins. But Tsunade told me all about you; she also told me that you were the sort of girl I should be with. That surprised me; she's sort of like an aunt to me and she never thought a single girl was right for me."

"She was probably just being nice," Kushina muttered.

Minato laughed. "Tsunade just being nice?"

Kushina smiled herself. "Yeah, she does like to tell it like it is."

"Of course she never told me you'd be the most beautiful girl I'd ever laid eyes on."

Her heartbeat picked up even though she told herself not to believe it. "Yeah right," she said teasingly. "How many girls have you said that to?"

"One." He rolled over to his side so he could look down into her face. "You really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and the most amazing."

She was just staring up into those incredible blue eyes. Her foggy brain couldn't think up anything to say. As she was looking up though she realized something.

"The fireworks have stopped."

He looked up for a second and nodded. "Yeah they have." He turned again and they were staring into each other's eyes.

"Want to make out?" Kushina suddenly asked.

"O.k."

And with that they began to passionately kiss and drunkenly grope each other.

---

"Ah hem," a loud voice said.

"Huh?" Minato sat up. "Ow!" He grabbed a throbbing head.

"Wha..." Kushina opened her eyes and let out a groan, some horrible little demons were driving pick axes into her skull. She looked around with half open eyes. "Where am I?"

"You're on the roof of your home niece," her uncle Saishu said. His voice was deliberately louder than it needed to be. He was not surprised to see both of them wincing with pain as she spoke. "I

gave you as much time as I could but the sun's about to come up. Why don't you both head inside now, to your **own** rooms ." He looked at his niece with a frown. "And just so you know your father spotted you up here before I did." Her uncle disappeared in a swirl of wind and mist.

"Great," she muttered. She wondered if she was going to get another lecture or if her dad would just count this as an effort to try and marry the super ninja.

"I'm sorry," Minato said.

Kushina looked at him feeling a little worried. *Why is he apologizing?* She spotted the bottle of sake she'd brought with her, it was nearly empty. She couldn't remember anything at all from last night. Looking at his clothes and her own they were both disheveled, but fully dressed. She was a virgin and from what she'd heard if she'd lost her virginity she'd feel sore as hell the next morning. Her head was killing her but otherwise she felt fine.

"Why are you apologizing?" She hated asking but if there was something she needed to know.

"I'm sorry, that I caused your father to see you in a compromising position."

Despite the head ache and dry tongue she grinned. "He caught you in the same position so I should apologize too." She tilted her head and looked at him questioningly. "Did you take advantage of me last night?"

"No!" He said immediately, then frowned and looked nervous. "At least I don't think I did. I don't really remember much. But I'm sure I would never do that."

"Too bad." She slowly got to her feet and headed to her room. "I'll see you later for our date."

## The proud ninja

The two of them were in a booth in a tiny little place near the docks. Kushina had brought him here when he confirmed that miso ramen was indeed his favorite food. The restaurant was a little family place, with the father doing most of the cooking, the mother doing the greeting, and the sons and daughters handling the duties of waiter/waitress / busboy. The ramen was delicious and probably the best he'd ever had outside of Konoha.

"You know I always say that places you've never heard of have the best food." Minato said as he finished up his bowl of ramen.

"Well I guess they have to, otherwise no one would come to them." Kushina pointed out. She was of course dressed in the tiny little orange outfit she'd worn to dinner the other night. She was a woman of her word. "Normally you can also get some privacy at a place like this, but not tonight." She glanced around the crowded restaurant. *Everyone* was staring at them. Though at least the people had the good manners not to disturb them. She was a bit annoyed at that, she'd been hoping for a little intimate conversation with him. But she felt just a little inhibited with every customer and employee's eyes on them.

Minato was feeling a bit more at ease. "Well you know it's your fault everyone's looking at us."

"Oh really?" She said in a dead voice. "Is that what you think Mr. I am a ninja legend and just singlehandedly took down a fortress with four hundred Iwa nin single handed and could get myself elected king if I wanted?"

He grinned. "Well sure it sounds impressive if you say it like *that*."

She laughed a little. Despite his reputation and his position as a clan head he was very down to earth. He didn't think he was too good to

get cheap food in a little out of the way place or expect people to treat him with any special deference. In most ways he just seemed like a regular guy.

Just a regular guy who could butcher a few hundred Iwa nin.

"Well I come here a lot," Kushina told him. "So I don't think they're looking at me."

His grin turned into one of those huge smiles that she liked. "Have you ever come here dressed like that?"

Actually she had never even put on the tight fitting little orange dress until the other night. She gave him a wink. "Sure, all the time."

"Well in that case I think I'll have to see if I can get a job here."

"O.k., I'll put in a word with the owner and see what I can do." She gave him a serious tone. "But you will owe me."

---

When it was time to go the entire restaurant came to its feet and applauded. The mother, who also ran the register, refused to accept their money. Though she begged Minato to sign one of their menus.

Out in the street as they slowly headed back to the Uzumaki compound they continued to get special treatment. People gave them wide berth and would stop to applaud, cheer, bow, and even burst into tears.

Getting tired of this Kushina finally grabbed his arm and they leapt up onto a roof top so they could get a little privacy.

"You know," she said to him. "This is easily the most trouble I've ever had on a date."

"Well thank you for putting up with me."

She let out an exaggerated sigh. "Just count yourself lucky you're so damn good looking."

"So you think I'm good looking, huh?"

"Well," she paused a little. "You're not **too** hard on the eyes."

They strolled over the roof tops. Jumping between houses and leaping the streets when they had to. As they began to approach the compound their banter turned just a little more serious.

"What's Konoha like?" Kushina asked. "Are there really trees for hundreds of miles in all directions?"

"There sure are," Minato confirmed. "Fire country is a beautiful green place where everything grows. I love the spring and watching everything come back to life. I have a rose garden in my home; I love to watch the roses bloom."

" *You* have a rose garden? I don't believe it."

"I do," he said seriously. "It's actually a large one with some of the most beautiful roses in Fire country."

"Well, I'd love to see them some time."

He suddenly reached out and took her hand, bringing her to an abrupt stop. "Come to Konoha and I'll show them to you."

The feel of his strong hand holding hers sent a rush of heat through her. "Don't... don't say that unless you really mean it. I might just show up on your door one day demanding a free tour."

"You'll be welcome any time Kushina-chan," he said gently.

That gentle tone and the caring look in those pale blue eyes made her feel like a little girl. She wanted to squeal with joy.

"Well, I'll consider that an open invitation."

The two of them shared a warm smile. They continued on to the compound still holding hands.

---

The compound had settled into the quiet peace of early evening. No one seemed to be outside training and as they approached the main house only a few lights were on.

"So tell me Minato-kun," she said with a taunting smirk. "How do you usually end your first dates?"

"I usually just say good night at her door."

"What? You don't try and kiss her?" She shook her head in mock disappointment. "You leaf nin aren't very aggressive are you?"

With a playful smile he reached out with both hands and took of her hips, slowly pulling her close. "That's how it's usually done in Konoha," he told her in a pleasant soft voice. "But if the customs here are different I can adapt. I wouldn't want to disappoint you."

She let herself be pulled in until he had her right up against him and his arms were around her back. "That," she said a little breathlessly. "Would depend on the kiss." As he brought his mouth down towards hers she shut her eyes and waited for him to kiss her.

"Sensei!"

"Wha..."

"Huh..."

The two of them instinctively leapt apart and looked around.

"Up here," a voice called.

The two of them looked up to see a still masked Kakashi sticking his head out of a second story window.



"What is Kakashi?" Minato asked. "Is anything wrong?"

Kakashi deliberately turned his gaze to Kushina. "Not anymore, good night sensei, good night Uzumaki-san." He ducked back into his room and shut the window.

*Oh! That brat did it on purpose!* Kushina thought furiously. *If I still pulled pranks you'd wake tomorrow without a single hair on your body!*

Minato turned to her looking embarrassed with a hand behind his head. "Sorry about that," he said apologetically. "Well, I guess we should just say good night."

"Heh, yeah, good night Minato-kun." Kushina tried to laugh it off. *Kakashi! You ruined a beautiful romantic moment! Suffer my wrath!*

---

With the window closed Kakashi headed to bed.

"Well I have to give you credit," Obito said. "Even for you that was a new low."

"Kakashi, you ruined a beautiful romantic moment." Rin reprimanded. "Sensei and Kushina were going to kiss."

"That's why I did it," Kakashi said primly. "Sensei shouldn't waste his time with women who are so far beneath him. It might damage his reputation." The three teammates regularly shared a room whenever they stayed in a hotel. So none of them thought anything about sharing a room here. "I was only doing sensei a favor by helping him avoid needless entanglements."

"Yeah well if I'm ever about to make out with a really beautiful girl please don't do me any favors." Obito said.

Kakashi snorted. "What makes you think any woman would ever want to kiss a cry baby like you? You'll probably end up dying a

virgin."

"Jerk!" Obito grabbed a pillow and threw it at him.

Kakashi allowed it to hit him in the head. "Nice shot, I think we've finally found a weapon you have a real talent for."

"Guys," Rin pleaded. "Let's just go to sleep."

Kakashi shrugged and slipped into his bed. Obito grunted his annoyance but also settled in.

---

The following morning at breakfast Kushina came to the table with an old burlap sack with two wooden handles sticking out of it.

"Oh Kakashi," she said sweetly. "Your sensei tells me that you're always looking to learn new techniques and drills to improve your fighting ability. How would you like to train with me using a special method? It's guaranteed to improve sword skills as well as improve balance, dexterity, and stamina. What do you say?" She gave him a grin that a cat might have shown a mouse.

Kakashi sent her a smug glance. "No thanks, I already know how to use a sword." On his back he carried his father's sword, 'White Fang.' "Besides, I'm sure there's nothing you could teach me."

"Kakashi," Minato said in a friendly undertone. "Skills can always be improved, and it's dangerous to assume others don't know things that things you might like to learn."

At the head of the table Naoko spoke up. "Our clan specializes in swordsmanship. Kushina is a fifth level blade master, only I and my brother Saishu have better skills. She could definitely teach you something."

Kushina pulled one of the wooden practice swords from out of the sack. Right there in the kitchen she ran through a quick series of

jabs and strikes. The moves themselves were nothing special, but they were executed with speed and expert timing. Everyone, including Kakashi, could see she was clearly very skilled with a sword in her hand.

"I could definitely impart some wisdom to you," Kushina said happily. "Or do you just assume that since I'm from here I couldn't possibly have anything to teach a leaf nin?"

"Konoha ninja are the best in the world," Kakashi said proudly.

"Kakashi," Minato said with an unhappy look. "If we were that much better than everyone else wouldn't the war be over by now?"

"Hai sensei," Kakashi said and bowed slightly in his seat.

"Your student seems to have a real lack of fighting spirit," Kushina said to Minato. "At least when it comes to fighting with anything but words."

"I'm not afraid of anything," Kakashi shot back. "I just don't believe there's anything useful you could teach me. I'm a Chunin after all."

"So what?" Kushina laughed mockingly. "I'm a Jonin and an ANBU captain at that."

"Of Whirlpool."

"Kakashi..." Minato began.

"Yes that's right," Kushina said proudly. "I am of the Uzumaki clan of the village hidden within the whirlpool, and I say my skill with the sword is better than that of any *Chunin* no matter what village he comes from." Kakashi sent her a furious glare and she could even feel a little killer intent leaking out of him. "Oh I'm sorry, did I upset you?"

"If you really want to see what I can do, then I'll show you."

"Good," she said happily. "That's just what I wanted to here."

---

Following breakfast they all went out into the courtyard. Minato went up to Kushina to have a quiet word with her.

"I know Kakashi has some rough spots, but he's actually a fine ninja and I'm rather fond of him. I'd hate to have anything happen to him during a simple drill."

"Don't worry Minato-kun," she said. "I give you my word I won't kill him or permanently injure him."

"Why does that not put my mind at ease?"

---

"What do you think?" Rin asked quietly.

Obito grinned and bit down on the straw on his mouth. "I think the jerk is going down."

Rin shook her head. "Kakashi's the best, he won't lose."

"Oh yes he will," Naoko said as he came up to watch. "Your Kakashi will definitely lose and what's more he'll lose badly."

"With all due respect Naoko-san, you've never seen Kakashi fight." Rin said.

Naoko smiled down at the pint sized medic nin. "Little girl, hasn't it even occurred to you that *you've* never seen Kushina fight either?"

---

"So how do we do this?" Kakashi asked.

She tossed him one of the wooden swords and took the other. "It's called a circle drill." With her sword she drew a wide circle around herself. "The rules are simple. Attack me with your sword as hard as

you can. All you have to do is force any part of my body outside the circle. When you do that the drill is over."

"That's all?" Kakashi asked.

"That's all."

"This'll be easy." He said.

Kushina immediately began laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing," she said and brought her laughter under control. "I just remembered, I said the same damn thing the first time my brother made me do this." She lifted her sword up into the ready position. "You can begin."

The second she said that he raced in. He would make two feints aiming for her chest and left side before delivering his real strike to take out her feet. He was going to show her what the elite of Konoha could really do. He snapped off his feints and drew her sword up before bringing his back down in a lightning fast strike.

Thwack! The sound of wood striking wood reverberated through the open air.

"I'm sorry dear, did you not hear me?" Kushina said sweetly. His sword had been blocked before even getting within a foot of her. "I said you could start."

"Uh oh," Rin said.

---

"Pathetic..."

Thwack!

"Weak..."

Thwack!

"Ordinary..."

Thwack!

"Is this really the best you can do?" Kushina asked, contempt ringing in her voice. "You know I'm starting to think that except for your sensei you leaf nins don't deserve the reputation you've gotten."

"Yaaah!" Kakashi cried out and just attacked with blind fury hoping to wear her down and somehow break through. Up until now every strike no matter how well delivered had been blocked, and blocked easily. But he would not give up.

Seeing him attack without any plan, just relying on pure emotion to guide his attacks reminded her of some of her own drills against Shinzou. She could see how outclassed the boy was. Chunin or not he was no match for her. Oh he had some skill with the sword, that was obvious. But she was a fifth level blade master, and what's more she was an Uzumaki, part of a clan that made swordsmanship high art. The kid just wasn't on her level.

She still took every opportunity to insult and belittle him. Once she'd been a lot like Kakashi, arrogantly certain that she was the best and that her skills would see her through. Shinzou had taken an almost sadistic pleasure in flattening that pride in an endless series of these drills. She didn't think she would be able to get through the boy's thick skull in just one session. And it wasn't like he was her responsibility anyway. But she would do what she could to try and impart the lesson.

Besides... it was kind of fun treating him like a piñata.

---

They'd been at it for six hours straight. They'd both stopped for water but not for anything else. Panting and drenched in sweat Kakashi fell to one knee, his hands still gripped his sword.

"Don't tell me your tired," Kushina called with a grin. "I can keep going all day."

Kakashi looked up. Despite his exhaustion he forced himself back up to his feet. "I'm not done yet."

"Yes you are," Minato took the practice sword out of his grasp. "This practice has gone on long enough."

"But sensei..."

"I said it's done Kakashi," Minato's voice was stern and would take no back talk. "Go shower and eat, than let Rin take a look at your bruises."

"Hai sensei," Kakashi answered.

Kushina lowered her own sword and stepped out of the circle. "I suppose it's too much to hope for, but did you learn something from all this?"

Kakashi turned to answer her. "No, this was pointless. If this were real combat I would have killed you."

She smiled at him wickedly. "You keep telling yourself that."

With a scowl hidden beneath his mask Kakashi headed inside.

Kushina watched him go with a sad shake of her head. *Was I ever that stubborn and proud?* It didn't seem possible. "Your student is quite a piece of work."

Minato sighed wearily. "He has his good points, he is brave, tough, a genius, and even you will have to admit he has a lot of determination."

She nodded. "I'll grant you all that, but those strengths don't make up for his weaknesses. He is too proud and stubborn, once he decides what the right path is he won't change from that no matter what. I

hope you manage to teach him how to be a little more flexible before he gets himself or his teammates killed."

"I'm trying," he muttered. "Any way, I'm sorry you had to waste so much time on this."

"No problem!" She said with real enthusiasm. "I really liked smacking him, maybe we can do it again some time."



## The decisive moment

Following dinner the three of them went up to their room.

"Please take your shirt off Kakashi," Rin said in a business like tone.

Beneath his mask he frowned. "I'm not seriously hurt; you don't need to waste the chakra."

"If we were in the field that might be true," Rin said. "But we're in a safe location and I'll have recovered all my chakra before the morning. So there's no need for you to have to suffer any." She saw he was about to argue. "And anyway it's sensei's order." That halted any further argument as she knew it would. Subordinates had to obey all orders from their superiors, those were the rules. And Kakashi loved to follow the rules.

"Fine," he muttered. Remaining stiff he pulled off his jacket.

Rin gasped and Obito whistled as they saw all the black and blue marks that covered his back, arms, and chest.

"Wow, she really beat the crap out of you," Obito noted.

Kakashi sent him a hard look. "I'm sure if you'd been in my place you'd have started crying after one hit."

"That would be smarter than staying out there until you got killed." Obito shot back. "If sensei hadn't stopped you I bet you'd still be out there."

"A cry baby wouldn't understand commitment when he sees it."

Obito smiled. "Maybe not, but I sure know what stupidity looks like."

Kakashi started turning around to face him when Rin jumped in front. "No fighting!" She said to Kakashi sternly. "And Obito stop egging

him on! Can we get through one day without me having to be the referee between you two?"

As usually happened when she got between them both boys quieted down. With that settled she cast a simple medical jutsu and placed a hand on Kakashi's chest. A soft green glow surrounded the damaged skin. After less than a minute the bruise faded and the skin looked clear and normal again. She moved her hand to another spot and continued the process. After about twenty minutes all the bruises were gone and he looked as good as new.

Kakashi nodded and put his jacket back on. "Thanks." He said offhandedly.

Rin smiled and blushed just a tad. "You're welcome Kakashi-kun."

Kakashi failed to note the little bit of added warmth she had put in her reply.

Obito watched and couldn't help feeling annoyed. Just like always Rin did the very best she could for Kakashi, hoping he might appreciate it. And just like always he couldn't be bothered to notice. *He's such a jerk Rin! Why do you have to like him so much? He doesn't deserve it!*

Kakashi noticed the way Obito was looking at him and gave him a patronizing look. "You got something to say?"

"Yeah, you really piss me off sometimes." Not wanting to upset Rin he left the room before an argument could start between them.

"What is his problem?" Kakashi asked.

"Maybe he doesn't want to see you getting hurt for no reason," Rin answered. "I know I don't."

"Huh, well it doesn't matter," he lay out on his bed and relaxed. "We'll be out of this little backwater soon."

"What do you mean?" Rin asked.

"Think about it Rin," he said patiently. "The Hokage sent us here to help our precious allies and make sure they didn't get knocked out of the war. I mean as far as we're concerned the more Iwa nins stuck fighting on useless battle fronts the better. Every Iwa nin who is out here is one we don't have to face in Rain or Grass. But we didn't come here to do more than that. With their main fortress taken that should be plenty to keep Whirlpool in the war and on our side."

She nodded, that was obviously true.

"So we should be getting recalled before too long."

Rin also thought about that. Sadly she nodded again. Since graduating the academy she'd seen lots of combat all across the elemental lands. With the rock nins main force broken Whirlpool would likely become quiet. There were too many hot spots to keep Konoha's greatest ninja here for very long. "I suppose you're right," she said a little sadly. "It's too bad, I kind of like it here."

"Not me," Kakashi said firmly. His skin was healed but his ego was still badly bruised. "I'll be glad to get out of this damn marshland and back to civilization."

"I think sensei will be sorry to go," Rin pointed out.

"I suppose he will," Kakashi said. "But once he's back home he'll forget about this place." *And about that amazon too.*

---

There were two traits about Iwa nin that everyone agreed on. First they were tough, people who didn't think so usually learned the hard way they were wrong. Second they were stubborn, they didn't like to give up. When the main fortress was taken and the news spread that the Yellow Flash was in Whirlpool the rock nins immediately abandoned the supporting forts. It was obvious they could not be held anyway. At this point there were less than a hundred rock nins

left in Whirlpool country. Even without the Yellow Flash they were now outnumbered three to one by the whirlpool nin. Clearly they were in no position to hold onto the lands they had taken at the start of the campaign.

Given their circumstances they had two logical alternatives. They could bring in vast numbers of fresh troops and try to renew the offensive. Or they could pull their forces back to their own territory and finally abandon the war in whirlpool. With the demands of other fronts restarting the offensive in Whirlpool was out of the question. And yet the order to abandon their ground didn't come. Basically the Tsuchikage couldn't bring himself to send the retreat order and admit the entire attack had been a failure. So to protect his pride the Iwa nin who were still alive were left there in an impossible situation. Too weak to fight, but not permitted to retreat back to Earth country.

Naoko and his fellow whirlpool nins had no problem with this. They just started hunting down and exterminating all the damn rock nins still on their territory. With the Yellow Flash helping them it was too easy.

After two weeks the Tsuchikage finally sent out an order to abandon whirlpool and return to earth country. By that time there were barely a dozen rock nins left.

Also by that time a message had arrived for Minato from Konoha.

---

"You're leaving," Kushina said dully.

"Yeah," Minato said quietly. "With things here pretty much settled my orders are to return to Konoha."

They were sitting alone on the roof of her house. It was early evening and the stars were just coming out.

"Well, I can't say I'm surprised." She tried to sound upbeat as she handed the message back to him. "I mean we both knew you hadn't

some here to stay. It's not like we didn't know this was coming."

"Kushina I..."

She quickly stood up and stretched. "Well, we both had some fun didn't we? I'll get to tell my kids and my grandkids how I went on a date with the great Yellow Flash of Konoha." She began to head off the roof.

"Wait!" Minato jumped to his feet and grabbed her by the elbow. "Where are you going?"

"I'm not the sort for long emotional goodbyes. I'll see you off at the gate tomorrow; we'll say our goodbyes then." She tried to leave but he wouldn't let go of her.

"Kushina there's something I want to tell you."

"Whatever it is tell it to me tomorrow." She tried to leave but he just wouldn't let go.

"There is something I really need to say now," his voice sounded a little anxious. He could face an army of rock nins and not blink an eye, but trying to have a serious talk with her was making him sweat. "I want you to know that I think you're... you're very... special."

"Special?" She looked at him and raised an eyebrow. "What a safe word, one that can mean anything. Is that what you say to all the girls you flirt with when you're far from home?" She knew she sounded irritated but she couldn't help it. She wanted to hear him say that he cared for her, that she was in his heart, or hell that he was in **love** with her. Instead she was... special. Special? What the hell was that? Was that his standard farewell to every girl he met? *Goodbye, I want you to know that you're special.* She wrenched her arm free and walked away from him. "Thank you Minato-kun, you're special too. Goodnight."

---

*What did I say?* Minato could see she was upset but he didn't know what he'd said wrong. He'd dated before, but only women from his village. He had never before tried to get to know a woman from outside Konoha. The truth was he really *did* think she was very special. She was different from anyone else he had ever met. She was funny and lively and strong and she treated him like a man, not like the Namikaze clan head or the great war hero. She liked calling him Yellow Flash sometimes but she never acted like he was in any way better than she was. She even made him have to work for her attention sometimes, something he was not used to from women.

She was like this wondrous unique flower, truly one of a kind. The girl was truly special. Why had she taken it the way she had? They'd only known each other for less than a month; if he'd said he was falling in love with her wouldn't *that* have sounded like a lie?

He sighed. If only sensei were here. He thought of what the man would have said. He grimaced. *O.k., I wish aunt Tsunade were here, or maybe Hiashi.*

---

There was a quiet knock on her door. "Kushina, may I come in?"

Kushina quickly wiped her eyes. "Sure mom."

The door opened and her mother came into her room. She could see immediately that Kushina had been crying. At the moment she was lying on her bed curled up around a pillow. That was an old habit from when she was little. Whenever she would get in a fight with her brother or be scolded by her father she would go to her room and cry while she curled up on her bed. Seeing this her mother did what she would always do back then. She sat on the edge of her daughter's bed and placed her head on her lap.

"You know honey," she spoke gently and began to slowly stroke her daughter's hair. "He's not leaving you; he's just following his orders. You know he doesn't have a choice."

"Of course," Kushina said. "I mean I knew he was going to leave. It's not like I thought he was going to stay here forever."

"No, he was never going to stay," her mother agreed. "So you can't be upset about the fact he is going. He is a ninja bound to the service of his village as you are to yours."

"I know that, it's not a big deal."

Her mother nodded and continued to stroke her hair. "You may not see him again for a very long time. Have you told him your feelings?"

"I don't have any feelings for him," she said. "I... I was just teasing him a little. I mean I ne... never *really* thought anything might happen. I mean me and the Yellow Flash of Konoha? Yeah right. We had a little fun and now it's over. It doesn't mean anything."

She touched her daughter's cheek. "Then why were you crying?"

Kushina shut her eyes and said nothing.

"Nothing in this life is ever certain my dear child. We are not guaranteed anything, not even the next sunrise. In this world even legends must die in their time. Don't you think it would be a shame to let him go without telling him how you really feel about him?"

"It doesn't matter if I feel anything," she said hollowly. "I don't really matter to him anyway."

"Are you really sure about that?"

She waited but her daughter didn't reply, so she just stayed there comforting her until she finally drifted off to sleep.

---

That morning the entire Uzumaki clan gathered early in the morning to wish Minato and his team a safe journey. After a quick breakfast Minato and his students left the Uzumaki compound and headed for

the east gate. It was still well before dawn, they would be leaving in the darkness with most of the village still asleep. Only Naoko and his daughter accompanied them to the gate. There Naoko said his final goodbye and gave Minato a letter for the Hokage confirming Whirlpool's thanks and continued commitment to the alliance. With the official farewell now complete Naoko stepped out of the way and gave his daughter and Minato some room. Minato's team was already a polite distance away so the two of them could at least speak in private.

"Kushina, I am sorry if I gave you the wrong impression." Minato said hesitantly. "I guess the truth is I'm not really that good with expressing my feelings. I just want you to know that I really am so very glad I got to meet you and spend the time with you that I did. I promise I will never forget you." He tentatively put out his hand.

She saw the extended hand and looked up into his face. She knew the proper thing to do, the politic thing to do, would be to shake his hand and mutter something about what an honor it had been to get to know him. That was what her head was telling her.

Her heart on the other hand was screaming that it didn't give a damn about what was proper or politic. Her heart was filled to overflowing with **love** for this man. And she knew, she knew that if she didn't do something this moment would fade away and be gone forever.

So she slapped his hand away. "Baka!" she yelled at him. Before he could react she grabbed him by his trench coat and yanked him forward forcing him to bend down. She then wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a ferocious kiss. She heard gasps from everyone present, even the gate guards, but didn't care. She'd wanted to do this from the moment she laid eyes on him and there was no way in hell she was letting him leave without her kissing him at least once.

Minato was caught totally off guard. He'd thought she was angry with him. When she first grabbed him and put her mouth on his he'd frozen. If she'd been an Iwa deep cover agent that would have been



the end of him. But after the initial surprise his arms snaked around and grabbed onto her possessively. He could feel her body against his and he wanted more. Had things been different he just might have thrown her on the ground and done something that could have been in one of those books sensei liked to read. As it was their tongues writhed and their bodies compressed as people watched in a stunned silence.

Finally he let go and she stumbled back a couple steps. The two of them were just looking at one another, not believing what they had just done. Kushina was the one to get her wits back first.

"I am going to visit you one day to see that rose garden," she told him. "If you marry anyone before then I swear to kami I'll kill you."

Minato blinked a couple times. "O.k."

"Hey sensei!" Obito shouted. "Do it again!"

Kakashi promptly punched his arm as hard as he could. "Shut up!" He snapped. He looked over at Minato. "Shouldn't we be going sensei?"

"If you two want to get a room we can wait." Obito said.

Kakashi turned on him and released some killer intent. Obito wisely ducked behind Rin.

"All right that's enough you two!" Minato called out. He looked back to Kushina. "I really have to go now."

"I know," she said and smiled for him. "Take good care of yourself Minato-kun, and don't you dare forget about me or what I said."

He gave her that beautiful big smile that she just loved. "Not much chance of that." He reached out and touched her cheek. "Goodbye, Kushina-chan."

"Goodbye Minato-kun."

He turned away and ran, his team fell in behind him. Just before they were out of sight she saw him look back and wave.

She waved too and stayed where she was until he and the others were gone.

A cough got her attention and she turned to see her father looking at her with a frightening grimace. There was no way the whole village wouldn't hear about this. Even if he swore the guards to secrecy somehow the word would get out. "Do you have anything to say young lady?" He spoke in his most dire parental tone.

"Just one thing," she said seriously.

"I'm listening."

"How long until I can get a mission to Konoha?"

## Return to Konoha

It was a three day trip from Whirlpool back to Konoha. That first night they set the watch as they usually did. Kakashi would have the first shift while Minato would have the last. As Obito and Rin sent to sleep he decided it might be a good time to have a word with his most talented subordinate.

"I'm glad we haven't run into any problems so far on our return," Minato said pleasantly.

Kakashi eyed him stoically. "Yes sensei."

"Hopefully there won't be any problems."

"Yes sensei."

Minato looked at the masked ninja who was calmly looking back.

"If there's something you wish to discuss with me sensei there's no need to beat around the bush."

Minato smirked and wondered why he'd bothered trying to ease into it. "Kakashi I wanted to talk to you about your recent behavior."

Beneath the mask Kakashi frowned. "Did you find my behavior unsatisfactory? Am I to be reprimanded?"

"No! Nothing like that. Not every problem requires a punishment Kakashi."

"If an act is not severe enough to warrant punishment then by definition it would not be a problem."

"And right there is the issue I wanted to discuss with you," Minato said. "Kakashi you're already a Chunin, you'll be a Jonin before long and at that point I won't get to work with you too often anymore."

You'll be expected to not only go on dangerous missions but to be responsible for others. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

"You doubt my leadership skills?"

"I wouldn't put it that way," Minato answered. He thought about how exactly he wanted to phrase what he had to say. "You are a damn fine ninja Kakashi and more than deserving to be a Jonin. But part of the responsibility of leading a squad or a mission involves doing what you can to make the group and the members of it as strong as possible."

Kakashi nodded.

"Doing that means being a little more... forgiving of the failings of others."

"I am not sure I understand sensei. It is every ninja's responsibility to be strong and to carry out whatever role assigned to him. Weakness would endanger the mission and has to be punished."

"I hate to be the one to tell you this, but people aren't perfect. And that includes us ninja. You have to understand that and act accordingly. You also can't expect everyone to live up to your own standard."

"I only do my best to follow the rules and behave like a proper ninja," Kakashi said. "Those who do not follow the rules deserve to be punished is that not so sensei?"

Minato sighed. "Certainly, in *some* cases. But Kakashi the rules were never meant for every possible situation you may encounter. Things are always happening and circumstances are always changing, we live in a fluid environment and have to be able to adjust as circumstances dictate. The rules provide an excellent foundation and starting point, but they're not holy writ. If a situation dictates you act outside the rules then that is what you should do."

Kakashi gave him a hard look. "Even if you are punished for **not** following the rules?"

Minato understood his circumstances and just why, given what happened to his father, he was wedded to that viewpoint. The problem was he couldn't very well tell him not to follow the rules. "All I'm saying is that sometimes you need to value your own judgment above anything written in a rulebook. That is part of what being a leader and a Jonin is all about."

"I will keep that in mind sensei."

*I haven't changed his mind at all.* Minato realized. He hadn't expected a talk to do much good when so much else hadn't. But he'd hoped to at least shed a little light. But in this area Kakashi was willfully blind. *He's just going to have to learn from experience.* Hopefully the experience wouldn't kill him.

---

They returned to Konoha without incident, at the gates he told his team they were free for the remainder of the day. He could handle the rest. His three students scattered while he headed for the Tower. He only got about half way there when he found himself ambushed and surrounded.

"Welcome back Minato-kun!" a pink haired young woman cried out. The dozens of other women who had him trapped also joined in.

"Ah, it's always nice to be back." Minato tried to smile as he looked for an escape route. Using a jutsu to get away would be considered rude.

"Did you miss me?" Haruno Mai asked.

"Why would he miss an annoying brat like you?" A buxom blonde stepped forward and shoved Mai to the side. She leaned towards Minato, expertly giving him the best view of her magnificent breasts.

"You know Minato-kun I'm still waiting for our first date." Yamanaka Dita winked.

"Like he would waste his time on an empty headed milk cow like you!" Haruno Mai yelled furiously as a vein throbbed on her unusually large forehead.

"What did you say brat?" Dita yelled back.

"Milk cow!"

"Brat!"

"Milk cow!"

"Enough!" A thunderous roar from the back of the crowd silenced everyone else. The crowd parted as women either got out of the way or were shoved aside. "Play your silly games later," Tsunade yelled at them. "Right now Minato is expected at the Tower and you are all keeping the Lord Hokage waiting!"

Under that commanding glare the women quickly melted away. Dita waved to him and mouthed the words, 'call me' before going.

Minato sent Tsunade a relieved look. "Thanks auntie."

A vein began throbbing on her forehead. "Damn it brat how many times have I told you not to call me that?"

"I stopped counting a hundred," he managed with a straight face. "So is the Hokage actually waiting for me?"

"No, the old man's in a meeting right now, which means you've got a little bit of time." She grabbed his arm and began dragging him down a side street.

"Where are we going?"

"To a little bar I know, you're buying me a drink while you tell me all about your mission."

Minato flashed her a big smile. "So you just wanted me for yourself huh? Won't Dan get jealous?"

"Shut up brat."

---

The two of them found a booth with a little privacy. Tsunade opened a bottle of cheap sake and poured them each a shot. "People are talking about you again, Minato."

He took a sip of his drink as Tsunade downed hers in one go. "What are they saying *this* time?"

"About what you'd expect," she poured herself a refill. "They're saying you singlehandedly wiped out a Rock army and liberated Whirlpool country."

"I wouldn't say that," he told her. "I just helped local ninja the best I could."

"Is it true you took out a fortress alone and slaughtered five hundred enemy ninja?" Her second drink she sipped.

"There were only about four hundred," he muttered. "People always exaggerate."

She laughed seeing his shyness on display. "Not too much of an exaggeration though." She eyed him carefully as she took another sip. "Want to know what else they're saying?"

He could see the amused look in her eye and knew he wouldn't like it, whatever it was. "Not really, but you're going to tell me anyway."

She laughed and nodded. "You bet I am, they're starting to say that you're the strongest ninja in the village. They're starting to say that

you should be the old man's successor."

"Great," he sighed. "That's all I need."

Tsunade brought her glass to her lips. "Would that really be so bad?"

He looked at her in surprise. "What did you say?"

She finished what was in her glass and slapped it back on the table. "I said would it really be so bad? You're an annoying brat sometimes, but you've got a good heart and you give a damn about this village and the people in it. I've known all three Hokages, one was my grandfather, one was my granduncle, and one was my sensei. I think you'd be as good as any of them."

Minato felt his jaw drop as he gaped at her. Tsunade was never one for empty words, she said what she meant and didn't care if people didn't like it. Coming from her, what she'd just told him was one hell of a compliment. "Where is this suddenly coming from?"

"What? I'm not allowed to have a good opinion of you?" She began refilling her glass again.

"But why would you tell me something like that?"

She brought her glass halfway to her lips and stopped. She quickly looked around to see if anyone was close enough to overhear.

"Because if you're going to be the Fourth Hokage you're going to at least have to make an *effort*. At the very least you need to tell the old man you want the job."

"But I don't want it! I've never wanted it! The responsibility of trying to restore the Namikaze clan is more than enough. I don't want to be responsible for the whole village."

"And *that's* why it needs to be you brat. Because you don't want the position." She took a long sip. "Orochimaru doesn't feel that way, he thinks his position as successor is already set in stone. He's already



dreaming of what he'll do once he has power." Tsunade gave him a no nonsense look. "There are only two possible candidates to succeed, you and Orochimaru. One of you *will* be the Fourth and it needs to be you."

Minato took a slow sip from his own glass and carefully analyzed everything she'd said. "What's changed?"

"Changed? I don't know what you mean." She began pouring herself another refill.

He leaned back. "You've never cared about politics or about me being Hokage before. Now I come home and you're trying to convince to actually seek the position. Why? Don't you and sensei always say Orochimaru would be a great Hokage?"

"The pervert you call a sensei will feels that way. I've had a change of heart."

"Since when?"

"Since I tried talking to him about establishing a medical corps once this damn war is finally over. He laughed and told me that it would be a waste of resources, that *his* ninja should concentrate on fighting not healing. That there was nothing wrong with letting the weak die since it only made more room for the strong." She took a big swallow. "I've heard that attitude from him for years now, but it finally hit me that he really *doesn't* give a damn about the lives of others. He just sees them as tools for his own benefit. Sometimes a Hokage has to sacrifice the people under him, but it should be a last resort and done only for the greater good, never for his own ambitions. Stop and ask yourself Minato, is that the kind of man who should lead this village?"

He stared at her. Tsunade was often very passionate about things and had a tendency to get carried away sometimes. It was often easy to forget that she had a very sharp head on her shoulders. Everything she'd said to him only reinforced his own suspicions.

Sensei considered Orochimaru his best friend and Sarutobi proudly called him his finest student. That Orochimaru was brilliant, a true one of a kind genius, there was no denying. But there had always been something about the man that made his skin crawl.

Orochimaru might well be the strongest ninja in the village, he might also be the smartest. But while a Hokage needed both strength and intelligence there was something else he needed that Orochimaru seemed to be lacking. And that was compassion. That was what had truly set the three Hokages apart from other Kages from other villages. The Kazekage, Mizukage, Raikage, and Tsuchikage were all powerful and clever men, but they all pursued their own goals and used their villages to carry them out. What made Konoha different was that here the Hokages had always put the needs of the village first. All three had loved the village and its people.

Would Orochimaru?

"Anyway, I've said all I'm going to about the subject of who'll be the Fourth." She laughed and smiled at him. "But just so you know Dan has dibs on being Fifth. Now let's talk about something *really* important. While you were in Whirlpool did you meet Kushina?"

"Yeah, I did."

"She was just twelve when I met her so she should be about sixteen now. She was a cute kid so I trust she's a good looking woman."

"She is very attractive," Minato said carefully.

Tsunade was looking amused. "So did anything happen between you two?" She was only teasing him. Minato's shyness around women was almost as famous in the village as his ability as a ninja. So she was caught off guard when he nodded.

"You might say that."

She set her glass down and leaned forward. "What? Tell me everything."

He told her.

**" What?! You made out with her in front of her father?!!"**

Minato downed his drink and poured himself a new one, he suddenly felt the need for a little sake.

---

The Hokage nodded as he read the message Minato had delivered from the Uzumaki Naoko. He had also listened to Minato's oral report with great satisfaction. "You and your team did very well Minato. You've secured our alliance with Whirlpool and removed an enemy army from the board. You make me very proud."

"Thank you Hokage-sama, that means a great deal to me and to my team."

Sarutobi nodded. "Kakashi should be ready for promotion to Jonin soon don't you think?"

"Yes, though if I could I'd like to hold off just a little longer."

"As you like, but with the needs of the war we need very Jonin we can get." The Third nodded to him. "Anything else you'd like to add?"

Normally that was just a formality the Hokage liked to say before dismissing one of his people. "Actually Hokage-sama there is something I'd really like to say."

Sarutobi looked at him curiously. "Yes?"

Minato took a very deep breath. *Why do I suddenly feel like a man facing execution?* "Hokage-sama, I would like to formally request that you consider me as a candidate for the position of Fourth Hokage."

## To see the roses

After the meeting with the Hokage Minato was finally free to return home. The Namikaze estates covered two square miles and were located next door to the Hyuuga. They were surrounded by a ten foot high made of iron bars with a single large gate. The sentry who was on watch greeted him with an enthusiastic shout and telephoned the house. The estates were heavily wooded so no one could see the house from the street. Even walking the pathway it remained hidden until rounding the last bend, only then did it come into view.

Minato thought of it as home, or as the house, but in fact it was a vast mansion. It was three stories with columns and wide windows looking over a grand lawn. From the pathway you could see the large pond that was behind it as well as part of the obstacle course. To one side was the famous rose garden he'd told Kushina about. Within the mansion were over three hundred rooms including a dojo, indoor pool, and private library. This had been the home of the Namikaze for three generations. And if Minato had his way it would remain home for countless more.

As he approached the front door twenty people stood there waiting to greet him. Cooks, maids, gardeners, and other household staff all dressed in their various uniforms. All of them looking at him with honest smiles. He'd known them all his life; in a very real way they'd been the ones to raise him. He loved them.

A little bit ahead of all the other servants was a tiny old woman in a maid's dress. She was all of five feet with her grey hair tied in a neat bun. Despite her age she bowed smoothly and gracefully. "Welcome home, Minato-sama."

As one the other servants mimicked her, bowing and calling out their welcome. Minato stood before her and gave her and them a slight bow of his own. "Thank you Kaede, everyone, it's good to be back."

Her face was a serene mask. That was typical; she could give the Hyuuga lessons on maintaining a calm and serene air. But despite the front he could see the warmth in her brown eyes. "Are you hungry Minato-sama?"

He grinned. "Ravenous."

She nodded. "I've already made my special miso ramen. Come to the dining room and I will serve you."

That made him laugh. Somehow whenever he came back from a mission she would have his favorite meal waiting for him. Whenever there was news or an interesting rumor going through the village he would usually hear about it from her.

"You know Kaede one of these days you're going to have to tell me how you get your information."

"Well I could tell you Minato-sama," she said placidly. "But then I would be obliged to kill you."

He laughed again; it was really good to be home.

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## The Following Day

As she was walking down the street men stopped to stare and drool. A pair of rickshaws ran into each other with an impressive crash followed by loud shouts. She simply smiled at the chaos she was creating just by being in public. She had on a skin tight light purple leotard that covered her from her wrists to her ankles, except for the area below her neck. *That* part had been cut away to expose the top part of her most prominent features. As she watched a man walked face first into a tree, his eyes locked onto her chest. Yamanaka Dita laughed. Just another day in the life.

Passing a bar she spotted a familiar mop of pink hair and an equally familiar red and white outfit. Thinking to have a little fun she made a

quick detour.

"Isn't it a little early to be drinking brat? It's not even eleven." Dita slid easily onto the bar stool next to her friend / enemy / rival.

Haruno Mai looked up from her glass of wine and frowned. Couldn't she escape the annoying blonde even for a while? Her mood was not improved by the speed with which the bartender rushed over to take her order. "What do you want milk cow?"

"No need to be rude brat, I just saw you and thought I'd say hi." The bartender gave her a perrier with a lemon twist.

"You've said it, you can go now."

"Geez, what's got you in such a bad mood? Did you finally see yourself in the mirror?"

"Shouldn't a farmer somewhere be milking you right now?"

"Try not to be so jealous, it'll give you wrinkles, and with that forehead of yours you've got enough trouble as it is."

Mai dropped her head to the bar and waved her hand as if in surrender. "Enough, I don't have the energy today."

Dita was surprised, and disappointed, by her easy victory. Normally the two of them could go like this for hours. "What's wrong with you today? Are you sick or something?"

"You haven't heard," Mai said. "It's a total disaster."

"What?" Dita asked. "Did we lose a battle?"

"Worse, much worse, Minato-kun met a girl in Whirlpool, some princess."

"A princess?"

Mai nodded. "She'd the daughter of their ruler so that would make her a princess right? Anyway it seems Minato-kun fell in love with her. They had a long passionate kiss goodbye at the gate in front of his team. She promised to come see him while he promised to wait for her." Her head sunk down again. "It sounds like he's finally fallen in love with someone."

Dita looked at her. The she put her head back and began to laugh. "Kami, you're such an idiot!"

Mai's head snapped up and she glared at the other woman. "What the hell's so funny about this?"

"Oh think about it brat," Dita continued to laugh. "We're talking about Minato here. I mean he can barely handle holding his girlfriend's hand in public. You think he could kiss someone and make that kind of public declaration?"

Mai stopped to consider that with her wine soaked brain. She and Dita had known him since academy days. Minato was truly unique among all the men she'd ever known in that he was as brave and bold in a fight as you could ever hope. But when it came to women he was agonizingly shy, he didn't like public displays of affection and had trouble being romantic. It was a shame as there wasn't a woman in Konoha who would have said not to him.

"You know you have a point," Mai felt hope begin to return. "Maybe this is just some dumb rumor."

"Of course it is!" Dita said. "Honestly! Minato with some foreign princess? Why would he waste his time with that when he can have any woman from Konoha?"

Mai slowly nodded. "You know you're right, why should I be depressed? I'm sure I'll win Minato's heart one day!"

Dita smiled wickedly. "Who said you shouldn't be depressed? You still don't have a prayer; it just doesn't have anything to do with any

foreigner." She deliberately leaned back to push out her chest before Mai's face. "I mean why would Minato-kun choose you when he can have these?"

Mai smiled back. "Maybe he gets his dairy products at the grocery store."

"Brat!"

"Milk cow!"

---

He was in training ground 21 watching his students go through a simple exercise. It was a test of their fighting skills and teamwork. Minato had made a shadow clone and set it loose somewhere in the training ground. Their job was to track the clone down and destroy it using only taijutsu and weapons, no ninjutsu. Meanwhile his true self watched from concealment. Since Kakashi could summon his nin dogs to track it should have been a fairly easy assignment.

Of course it turned out to be anything but. The second the shadow clone explained and disappeared Kakashi turned to his teammates and began giving orders, he assumed the leadership position. Not surprisingly, Obito immediately objected to Kakashi's plan and offered up one of his own. Kakashi turned that down rather bluntly and tried to order Obito to obey him, at which point Rin was forced to step between to try and restore order. In the end Obito had decided to go on his own while Rin had gone with Kakashi and one of his nin dogs.

Minato was disappointed, however the exercise turned out it was already a failure. Obito was rebellious while Kakashi was uncompromising. They both refused to listen to the other and Rin was unable to do much more than keep them from actually coming to blows. He was trying to think up some new way to get them to improve their teamwork when he felt something slowly coming up from behind.



"Hello Orochimaru," he did not bother to turn around. "It's been awhile."

"Ku, ku, ku, I see your skills have not diminished Minato-kun." Orochimaru's form slowly rose up out of the earth just a few feet behind Minato.

Minato slowly turned around to face his senior. He was very glad for his talent with sensing and recognizing chakra signatures. Even though he'd known the man for years he didn't like the idea of Orochimaru being able to sneak up on him. "I reserved this training ground for the day, is there some reason you've come here? Or did you want to talk to me?"

Orochimaru sent out a sickly grin. "Oh was this ground reserved? My apologies then, I came here to give my student a little training. I am teaching her how to track by having her try to find me."

"I'm doing something similar with my team." Minato said. "Odd coincidence don't you think?"

"Indeed," Orochimaru said pleasantly. "Well, since we have not seen each other in a while shall we have a pleasant chat Minato-kun?"

"Is there anything in particular you'd like to talk about?"

"Why yesss, as a matter of fact." Orochimaru gazed at him with his slitted yellowish eyes. "I hear you wish to be considered for Hokage."

"Word travels fast," Minato noted.

"Oh, I did not hear of it through rumor. Sarutobi-sensei told me himself. He thought it only fair that I know I had competition." Orochimaru chuckled slightly. "Not that I would ever see you as competition Minato-kun."

Minato tried not to show his annoyance. He didn't really care much about his reputation. That didn't mean he liked having someone

simply dismiss him. "You don't consider me a worthy candidate?"

"Oh my dear Minato-kun, of *course* you are worthy. You are after all Konoha's beloved Yellow Flash and the last of a proud line. I am merely surprised to learn that you would be so ambitious, that's not really like you."

"I simply think I would make a good Hokage."

Orochimaru tilted his head a bit. "Better than me?"

"Yes."

A look of surprise crossed that pale face and the lips cracked open to emit amused laughter. "You know for a second there you reminded me of your sensei, he also has the habit of speaking before thinking." The laughter died away. "It's a habit that usually gets him in trouble."

"My answer was an honest one," he had a slight grin of his own. "If that causes trouble then I'll just have to deal with it."

"I see, and tell me Minato-kun *why* do you think you would make a better Hokage? I am older, more experienced, a genius, the creator of a dozen jutsus, as well as one who has earned the title of Sannin. In my hands Konoha could become a power to rival the empires of old. I would bring us riches and glory and make us feared throughout the elemental lands."

"Making everyone fear us is a sure recipe for making them hate us as well."

"Let them hate, so long as they fear," Orochimaru said.

Minato shook his head. "I was just in Whirlpool. My team and I were welcomed with open arms. Not because we were feared but because we came as friends and allies. *That* is what Konoha needs, not potential enemies waiting for a moment of weakness."

"Friends? Allies?" Orochimaru shook his head mockingly. "Now you *really* sound like Jiraiya's student. You can never trust in anyone else's strength. That is a sure way to invite betrayal. Safety lies in creating your own strength and in crippling that of any possible adversary."

"And that sounds like a recipe for constant, unending war."

"Yessss," he said dreamily. "War strengthens and hardens in a way mere training never can. When this war is over we will be far stronger than we were, and our adversaries far weaker. *That* is the way to power for a ninja village, the way to greatness."

"You honestly believe we're stronger now than we were before all this fighting began?" Minato was disbelieving. "What about all the dead? Think off all the brave ninja we've lost who will never serve this village again. How can you possibly see that as anything other than a huge waste?"

"War kills only where there is weakness to be killed. The weak die to make room for the strong, that is the law of nature and we must follow it as well. It makes no difference how many we lose if our enemies lose more."

"Sarutobi doesn't feel that way," Minato said grimly. Hearing Orochimaru express his opinion only made him that much more certain that trying to become the Fourth was the right choice.

"Sarutobi-sensei is a great man and a great leader, but his views are outdated. He is growing old. When this war is finally over it will be time for a new Hokage with new ideas for the future."

"Sensei! I found you!"

Both men halted their quarrel and looked up to see a young girl with purple hair jump down to Orochimaru's side.

Orochimaru nodded to her. "Well done Anko, I see your tracking skills have improved."

The little girl smiled happily at her sensei's praise. She then looked to Minato and waved to him shyly.

"Well, it seems this training ground has already been reserved by Minato-kun. We'll try training ground 44, that one is usually available."

Anko paled a bit but nodded.

Orochimaru looked back at Minato. "Just so you know Minato-kun, Sarutobi-sensei considers me his only possible successor. I **will** be Hokage, and when I am I will not hold this against you. In time I am sure you will come over to my way of thinking."

Orochimaru and Anko quickly leapt away.

"Not bloody likely," Minato muttered as he watched them go.

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### **Three Months Later**

The Chunin who was guarding the gate tensed a little as he spotted the foreign nin being escorted by two Leaf nin. It being wartime direct attacks on the village were always a possibility. Even coming in the open under guard did not make that impossible, suicide missions were a part of this war. As the foreigner halted he spoke in a stern voice and held out his hand. "Please present your papers and state your identity and the purpose of your visit."

With an excited smile she took out her i.d. and the letter from the Hokage authorizing her arrival and presence here. "My name is Uzumaki Kushina and I am here to negotiate with your Hokage on behalf of my village," she suddenly laughed. "I've also come to see the roses."

# Welcome to Konoha

## Four Days Earlier

There was a knock on his office door. "Come in honey," Uzumaki Naoko called out.

The door opened and an ANBU captain stepped into the office of the village Headsman. "You know dad if it had been someone other than me you'd be feeling a little embarrassed right now."

"If it were someone other than you dear **you** would have some explaining to do."

"Well then I guess it's a good thing it was me then," without waiting for an invitation she sat down in a chair in front of his desk. "So why are we meeting here instead of at home?" Normally she saw her father in the house; he usually didn't bother having her come to his office in the government building.

"Before I get into that tell me how the mission went."

She shrugged. "Another town burned down, another bunch of civilians killed and sent running."

"And your squad ran into no opposition?"

"No opposition from any *ninja* the local militia tried to put up a fight."

"Did your squad suffer any casualties?"

She answered that with a look.

"Never mind," unless they were outnumbered a hundred to one there was no way armed civilians were going to do anything to trained *ninja*.

"It's just pathetic," Kushina said in an annoyed tone. "The damn rock nins are just letting us run wild through their territory. They're not even trying to protect their people."

Naoko sighed. "They know that ultimately we're no real threat to them. We can burn everything along the border but Earth country is so huge that they can lose those places and not even notice. And it's not as if we can mount a real invasion with our slender resources. We're like a flea attacking a lion. We can cause a little pain and even draw a little blood, but in the end no matter how savagely we try and bite we can't do any real harm."

She frowned sourly. She didn't like thinking of her village as nothing more than a flea. "Those damn rock nins should at least *try* and protect their territory though."

Naoko grinned. "Maybe that's just proof that even they don't have unlimited resources. This war has been going on for more than four years now and all sides have suffered heavy losses. We are now entering a critical stage where some of the participants may soon be ready to come to terms."

"Peace?" Kushina asked hopefully. No matter how many victories they won they remained outnumbered. As long as the war continued her homeland remained under threat. "Do you really think that's possible?"

"Perhaps," Naoko said carefully. "There are rumors that with their Kazekage gone that Suna is beginning to fall apart."

"Who cares about Wind? We aren't at war with them."

"But our allies in Leaf are, and if they are no longer forced to keep an army in the field against Suna they will have fresh strength to fight Earth. The Tsuchikage is a stubborn man; he will not be ready for peace until he is convinced he has no chance to win a military victory. I think the fact he is no longer trying to defend the front here

is a sign he is gathering all his remaining forces for one last toss of the dice."

That news did not make her happy. "If that's true then Fire country is in for it, while we just sit here and watch."

"Which is why I'm sending an expeditionary force of fifty ninja to help them."

She suddenly sat up. Now this was news! "You are?" She asked excitedly. If he was sending a force out to fight with the Leaf nins she would **definitely** be one of them. Which meant she might be able to visit Konoha... and a certain someone.

"Since there seems to be no danger of a renewed attack against us I think we can safely spare that many and send them where they'll do the most good. I think that would be a fitting way to show the Hokage our real appreciation for his help."

"When do we leave?"

He smiled. "It's not that simple, we can't just show up in Fire country with a small army. Even if we are allies the Hokage might not appreciate that. Therefore I'll need someone to go there and make the necessary arrangements." Reaching into his desk he produced a letter that bore the Hokage's seal and signature. "Now you did say you wanted a mission to Konoha didn't you?"

She took the letter and stared at it. It was an invitation to come to the hidden leaf village. "Yatah!!" She leapt into the air and pumped her fist.

Naoko sighed and hoped he hadn't made a bad decision. "Please at least *try* not to do anything too embarrassing."

---

And so she had found herself escorted into the village of Konoha and directly to the large tower at its heart. Walking through the

streets with a couple leaf nin flanking her she drew quite a bit of attention. In her red and black bodysuit and whirlpool hitai-ite people knew she was a foreign ninja, though not if she was friend or foe. The stares and whispers that accompanied her arrival were not quite the reception she'd had in mind. Even so she was immensely impressed with what she saw. Konoha was *huge*, it was probably ten times the size of Whirlpool and it seemed to be crammed with people. It was no wonder they were one of the big five. Of course she was also impressed by the faces that seemed to be looking down on her from the cliff. Tsunade had told her about the Hokage monument. But seeing it was something else again. It was impressive to think that the village would go to such immense trouble just to honor its leaders.

As she walked she focused on the third face up there. That was Sarutobi, Tsunade's and Jiraiya's former sensei and the current Hokage she was going to meet. Tsunade and Jiraiya had both told her about him. Hopefully he wasn't as bad as they made out.

---

Finally meeting him she had been surprised at how old he was. His hair was almost completely grey and there were deep wrinkles all over his face. He was dressed in white and red robes and had a lit pipe on hand. Her first impression of him was that he seemed more a kindly and wise grandfather than a leader of a powerful village. But she knew his reputation had to have been well earned. She also reminded herself that her own father had a very kind face, but could be ruthless when the village needed him to be.

There were no serious negotiations at this first meeting. It was more to allow her to be introduced to him and for her to be made welcome. At that Sarutobi excelled, he had a friendly demeanor and an easy charm about him that just naturally put you at ease.

"I hope you will convey to your father and to your village the deep appreciation I feel at this offer of aid. Have no doubt we shall gladly accept your help."



Kushina bowed low to him. She *could* be courteous when she needed to be. "Lord Hokage, it is our honor to help you now in any way that we can. After all the aid you provided us in our hour of need it is only just that we support you now."

He nodded slightly. "You should also know that I agree with your father's assessment of the situation. I also expect a major attack from Earth country. Your aid may help stem the tide."

"Rest assured Lord Hokage that Whirlpool will do all that we can to aid in bringing this war to an end."

The Hokage again nodded. "I am afraid I have pressing business, but we will meet again soon. In the meantime I have arranged for someone to act as your escort within the village. Someone you have already met."

Her heart began to race inside her chest. *Someone I've already met?* Only possibility came to mind. She had to resist the urge to start jumping around again and shouting. "Thank you Lord Hokage."

With that her first meeting with Sarutobi came to an end. She exited his office and found her escort waiting for her outside. A certain blonde ninja.

"Kushina!" Tsunade said happily. "Look at how you've grown! It's wonderful to see you."

Seeing Tsunade she couldn't feel a sudden crash of disappointment. "Oh... so you're my escort?"

The depressed reaction caught her off guard. "Sorry if having one of the Sannin escort you is not good enough."

"Ah, sorry, sorry," she gave an embarrassed grin and hurried over to give the woman a hug. "It's really good to see you again Tsunade-chan."

"Well that's more like it," Tsunade said with warmth. "How was your trip here?"

"Uneventful fortunately, there was a little trouble when I met the border patrol but nothing too serious."

"Well, I'm sure you're feeling a little tired and sweaty." Tsunade grinned. "Fortunately I have just the thing. Come on; let me show you one of the best things about this village." She grabbed her arm and began dragging her outside.

---

The man held up a drinking bowl filled with sake. "To the Fourth Hokage! Long may he reign!"

Minato had no choice but to join his best friend in the toast, even if it made him a bit uncomfortable. "Nothing has been decided yet, in fact it will probably still be Orochimaru."

Hiashi laughed and smiled. The new clan head of the Hyuuga didn't do that in public much anymore. With his father's recent death and his elevation Hiashi had begun wearing the calm stoic mask the Hyuuga were so well known for. Only in private did the man still laugh and smile, especially when his wife Hannah was nearby.

"Nonsense," Hiashi said confidently. "Everyone has always assumed it would be Orochimaru, but Sarutobi has never gone to the Council to ask he be officially recognized as successor. Now why do you suppose that is?"

"It's probably just because he thought it a formality and didn't bother." Minato said.

"Maybe," Hiashi said slyly. "Maybe not. Look underneath the underneath, maybe he still has some doubts about the man and was hoping someone more worthy would appear. And now someone has."

"You see hidden meanings everywhere Hiashi," Minato took a sip from his own drink. "Sarutobi thinks the world of Orochimaru."

"Oh no doubt, and there's no question Orochimaru would make a strong and worthy Hokage."

Minato frowned. "You see?"

"You didn't let me finish," Hiashi chided. "He would make a fine Hokage, *but* a very different Hokage too. Sarutobi is too intelligent a man not to see that no matter how fond of Orochimaru he might be. The Hokage *must* still have doubts. Which means the door is open for you and I intend to do everything I can to get the Council on your side."

"You don't need to do that," Minato told him.

Hiashi laughed. "Nonsense! Since when has the Hyuuga clan ever been shy about using its political influence? Unlike you my friend I have no qualms about politicking and deal making if it will help put your face up on the cliff." He lifted his bowl again in another toast. "You have the complete and total support of the Hyuuga clan my friend and all that comes with it."

"Well... I thank you."

"And once you're Hokage, maybe you can do a little something in return."

Minato lifted an eyebrow. Hiashi was a damn good friend, but he was also clan head of the Hyuuga. It was not always clear where the one ended and the other began. "What do you have in mind?"

"Don't you think it's time the military police were enlarged?" Hiashi said innocently. "This village has brown greatly since it was founded and I'm afraid they are no longer up to the task of ensuring the peace and tranquility of the village."

"And the Hyuuga clan would be willing to help with this immense burden?" Minato was proud of himself, he'd only just sounded sarcastic. "How generous of you, but no."

"But..."

"Hiashi," Minato said firmly. "You damn well know how prickly the Uchihas can be about their privileges. The military police are theirs and they've given Konoha fine service. I am not going to upset them by interfering with the police force."

"But don't you think it's a bad idea to have one clan dominating the police force?" Hiashi asked reasonably.

"In theory? Sure, but they military police exist and have since the founding of the village. The Uchiha clan were given permission to create them by the First Hokage. If I tried to change that in any way I'd infuriate the entire clan."

"The Uchiha will never support you," Hiashi argued. "Especially not once I start making my support public. They'll oppose you just to spite me."

Minato knew that was likely true. Uchiha and Hyuuga were old rivals from long before Konoha had been a village. "Even so, I won't do anything to upset the peace of the village just for my own gain."

Hiashi frowned at his friend. "You have a lot to learn about politics. When you're dealing with powerful people you never say, 'no' you say maybe."

"I'm not a politician," Minato said flatly. "And I don't want you expecting favors I have no intention of granting. If you want to support me Hiashi I'd be grateful for the help, but only if you want to do it of your own accord. If it's just for the sake of some reward then I can't oblige you."

Hiashi continued to frown for a moment and then slowly began to laugh. "Spoken like a true Hokage. Fine then, you have the total support of my clan, no strings attached."

---

"Now *this* is the life." Tsunade said with deep pleasure.

"Ahhhhh," Kushina said. "I wish we had hot baths in Whirlpool."

The two of them were among about fifteen women who were currently in the women's bathhouse soaking and relaxing. Tsunade had insisted on bringing her directly here from the Tower. At first Kushina had been scandalized about the idea of bathing in *public*. That wasn't something her people did. But Tsunade had dragged her into the place despite her protests. Seeing other naked women there and listening to Tsunade describe the experience she'd decided to be brave and give it a shot. She was glad Tsunade had insisted. She could feel soreness just melting away.

"When I get back I'm going to tell my father about this and see that we have one built."

"You should, these are definitely... did you hear that?"

Kushina listened. "It sounds like someone is shouting outside." She continued to listen. "Is... is that Kakashi's voice?"

"It couldn't be," Tsunade said. "Kakashi is definitely not the sort to be hanging around the women's bathhouse."

As they were both listening they heard a deep booming voice say the words, 'Toad Sage.'

"That BASTARD!!" With a huge splash Tsunade leapt out of the bath and ran towards the dressing room.

"Hey!" Kushina shouted. She decided to get out of the bath as well and follow her.

She saw Tsunade wrap a towel around herself and run outside. Kushina wasn't *that* brave. She put her clothes back on as fast as she could. As she was getting dressed she felt a killer intent coming from outside and shouts from all sorts of voices. She didn't know what was happening but as soon as she had her clothes on she ran out, not even bothering to dry her hair.

When she got out there she saw Tsunade, still in nothing but a towel, beating Jiraiya mercilessly into the pavement.

"Tsunade! What the hell is going on here?"

"Jiraiya was trying to peep on the women taking their baths." Kushina was surprised to see Kakashi standing there watching what was going on. "I tried to perform a citizen's arrest, at that point Tsunade came out and this happened."

Kushina was shocked to the core. "Wait a minute! Jiraiya was *peeping* ?!"

Kakashi looked at her. "Of course," he answered sardonically. "He's a huge pervert, everyone knows that."

"But I thought he was a gentleman!" They'd met when she was twelve and he had seemed like a good man, she'd rather liked him.

"A gentleman? Jiraiya? You have met him before right?"

A dark look slowly covered her face. *He was peeping on me!* Yanking out her katana she began marching into the middle of the street.

"I wouldn't try and stop Tsunade right now," Kakashi warned.

"Who the hell said I wanted to stop her?!"

---

Tragically this was the first and last time Kushina ever used a public bath. Many years later on a mission an older and less rigid Kakashi told this story to his team. But to spare one team member unnecessary embarrassment he never mentioned Kushina's presence.

## Amid the roses

Tsunade was sitting in the chair while Sarutobi stood over her glaring. Sarutobi was probably the calmest and most reasonable person she'd ever known. It was a rare thing to ever see him really truly angry. But when he did get angry it was all the more frightening for being such a rare event. Sitting there she didn't feel like an adult and a mighty ninja, she felt like a little girl about to get scolded.

"What were you thinking?!" Sarutobi yelled at her. "He almost **died** Tsunade! If I hadn't shown up when I did you almost certainly would have **killed** him!"

It was true; she'd only stopped when the Hokage had personally ordered her to. Prior to that a couple unfortunate ANBU tried to pull her off of him. She would have to visit them in the hospital and tend to their wounds, that was only fair. They'd only been doing their jobs after all.

"He was peeping..." she tried to defend herself.

"I don't care!" Sarutobi roared. "If you'd beaten him unconscious I would accept that. But what you did was completely out of line with the offense. Were you trying to kill him?"

"Maybe a little," she muttered. By the wave of killer intent that hit her she knew that had been the wrong answer.

"I have had enough of your constant bickering and fighting, the two of you are as much children as when you first became my students. But even for you Tsunade this was too much!" He began pacing furiously back and forth. "And what makes it even worse was you instigated a foreign diplomat into helping you attack your own teammate."



"I didn't have to convince her to do anything," Tsunade said. "She was angry too and had just as much reason to punish that pervert as I did."

He stopped pacing and turned his full attention on her. She immediately regretted her words and wished she'd just kept her big mouth shut. "She is a foreign dignitary here on a diplomatic mission and she attacked one of the Sannin in public with a sword! Do you begin to see how that might be a problem?!"

*Well at least she only used the flat of her sword; she didn't actually cut anything off. Too bad.* "Where is Kushina now?"

"I decided to try and pretend her involvement never happened. Right now she has someone else acting as her escort. As for you..."

Tsunade sat there and accepted her sensei's anger. As much as she hated to admit it he was right. No matter how vile and perverted the act the bastard hadn't deserved to almost die. Skinning him and putting him in a barrel of salt, now *that* would have been a fitting punishment.

---

Kushina looked over to her escort. "Thank you soooo much for helping me find my way." She spoke in a sickeningly sweet tone.

Kakashi turned to send her a flat look; she could just imagine the scowl hidden beneath that mask. "You needn't thank me, I simply carrying out an order from the Hokage. It's not as though I want to help you. A ninja carries out his duty regardless of any personal feeling or bias. That is the nineteenth rule of..."

"Ninja conduct," Kushina cut him off. "I know, we have heard of them even in Whirlpool."

"I would never guess that given the way you behave."

"What? You mean as though I were a real live flesh and blood person?" She shook her head. "Life is too short and too precious not to take a chance now and again."

"Don't you care what others think of you? Don't you care about your reputation?"

"Nope," she said happily. "I know my own worth, so who gives a damn what others think?"

He glared at her and her pleased grin. "But a ninja's reputation is everything! It determines your place within the village and how others see you! How can you be so cavalier about something so important?"

"You don't get it Kakashi," she said. "It doesn't matter what others think about you because in the end the only person you really have to satisfy is yourself. If you waste your time worrying what others think you'll never find happiness or satisfaction."

Her playful words seemed to mock everything he believed in. *She's so stupid*, he thought. *She's never seen what happens when people judge someone a disgrace. The way it eats out the soul like a cancer.* "Someone like you doesn't deserve to be with a great man like sensei."

She laughed. "See? Since I don't give a damn what you or anyone else thinks that makes life so much easier."

---

Kaede was in a room polishing some of the silver. Despite her age and her senior position she still liked to keep busy with the many tasks required in a mansion. She was interrupted by one of the maids.

"Kaede-san, we have guests coming up the walkway."

Kaede looked up from her work. If they were already coming up the walkway they had to be either on official business or associates of the master's. "And who is visiting?"

"Kakashi-san and a guest, some foreigner named Kushina."

*A foreigner?* That was certainly unusual. Few foreigners were allowed into the village given wartime security. No foreigner had visited the Namikaze mansion in years. "Well then, I suppose I should welcome them."

---

Kakashi was relaxed, if bored, as he sat there sipping tea and nibbling on some sweet bread. As was his habit when he ate in public he managed to keep his face hidden. He'd been here to his sensei's home many times before and knew Kaede well. Interestingly though Kushina seemed to be fidgeting a bit as she sat across from the woman in the maid's dress. *Heh, so much for not caring about the opinion of others.*

Kushina was sitting in a chair sipping tea directly across from Kaede, a tiny little old woman in a maid's uniform. Kaede was sitting there with her hands in her lap, her face an unreadable mask, her brown eyes silently judging her. Kushina was feeling a little worried about what the old woman was thinking. Walking up the path Kakashi had described her.

---

"Kaede will probably be the one to greet us," he'd said. "She is the head servant of the Namikaze household. You should try very hard to make a good impression with her."

"Oh? Why's that?" The Uzumaki did not have servants. Everything within the family compound was handled by members of the clan.

"Because sensei trusts her judgment completely. His mother died when he was four and she was the one who mainly raised him. He sees her more like a surrogate mother than like a servant."

*He sees her like a mother?* That was certainly good to know. "Thank you for the information." She eyed him suspiciously. "Why give me a warning though?"

"A ninja carries out his duty regardless of any personal feeling or bias," he told her. "For the moment my mission is to act as your escort and guide. Part of my responsibility is to help you avoid unnecessary trouble."

She slowly nodded. Maybe there was something to say about someone trying to live up to the principles of the ninja code.

"Besides," Kakashi added. "I have faith that Kaede will see right through you no matter what you do."

"Gee thanks." Yes, she thought. *There's something to be said but not much.*

---

"Again I apologize that Minato-sama is not present." Kaede said suddenly. "He should be back from the Hyuuga estate shortly."

"Oh no problem," Kushina tried to smile. "It's not as though he knew I was coming."

"You wear the symbol of the village hidden in the Whirlpool; I presume that you met the master during his time there."

She nodded feeling a bit impressed. Many of the local ninja had not known the symbol on her hitai-ite. "Yes, I was his escort while he was there."

Kaede picked up her own tea cup and took a sip. Her eyes never left Kushina. "Have you come here on business then?"

"Ah, not... not exactly."

"Oh?" The woman took another sip and let the word just hang there in the air.

Kushina felt the unaccountable desire to squirm underneath that nonblinking gaze. "Well... Minato-kun promised me a tour of the rose garden."

The response produced an eyeblink and the tiniest reaction on the old woman's face. "Did he? Well you should feel honored, the Namikaze rose gardens are famous throughout the Land of Fire. To be offered a private tour of them is most unusual."

She tried to relax a bit. "I do feel very honored."

"Of course you are far from the first woman who he has ever shown around them."

"Heh, well, I don't suppose that's too surprising."

Kaede nodded slightly. "Though you will be the first foreign woman he has ever invited. Is there any reason in particular that Minato-sama extended the invitation?"

She recalled exactly what she'd said to him after their very passionate, very public kiss. *'I am going to visit you one day to see that rose garden... If you marry anyone before then I swear to kami I'll kill you.'* Technically she supposed he'd never actually invited her, she'd invited herself. "Nothing comes to mind."

"Oh? Does that mean you are *not* the woman he shared a public kiss with before leaving Whirlpool?"

Her face instantly turned a deep shade of red. "Ah, uhm, Minato-kun told you about that?"

"No, but it is a rumor that has been circulating since his return to the village."

*Great, caught in a lie.* "I consider that to be a private matter between Minato and me."

"If you wished it to be private then you should not have chosen a public forum."

As an ANBU she'd conducted her share of interrogations. Right now it felt like she was on the wrong end of one. Fortunately she received a reprieve as the door opened and the master of the house entered. He saw his two guests and Kaede. He froze and stared at the beautiful red haired kunoichi.

"Kushina! What are you doing here?"

She jumped to her feet and ran over to him. "Tour, rose garden, now."

"O.k., but, ah..."

She grabbed his hand and dragged right back out the door before he could argue with her.

---

They were sitting on a simple wooden bench surrounded on all sides by six foot tall bushes. The bushes were in full bloom displaying a breath taking variety of colors. Not just red but white, pink, yellow, and even some rare blue roses were on display. Even more amazing than the sight was the perfumed scent of all the flowers. It seemed to completely fill the air and to sweeten each breath. The height of the bushes also provided a marvelous feeling of privacy. Though they could still be seen from the second and third story windows facing their direction.

Minato was smiling and rubbing the back of his head. "I hope Kaede wasn't too bad, she's sort of protective of me."

"I hadn't noticed," she said dryly. She let out a deep breath. "It's all right; Kakashi tells me she's sort of a mom to you so I guess it's

natural for her to be a little mistrusting."

"So how long ago did you get here?"

"About two hours."

"What do you think of Konoha so far?"

"The word, 'impressive' comes to mind. Everything from the size of the village to the monument and even the size of the forest that surrounds it is amazing." She nodded to the mansion that towered above them. "Oh and this place isn't too shabby either. Though some of the people could be a bit friendlier, I got a lot of ugly stares on my way to speak with your Hokage."

"I'm very sorry about that," Minato said sincerely. "We seem to have enemies on all sides so the villagers tend to feel a little besieged sometimes. It wasn't that way before the war and I'm sure it won't be after. But for right now..." he shrugged helplessly.

"I understand and it's all right. Though I'm disappointed about one other thing."

"What's that?"

She scooched over so she was sitting right up against him. "Well, I'm a little disappointed in you Minato-kun honey. Here you've got this beautiful woman who's come hundreds of miles to see you all alone in this secluded spot and you haven't even tried anything yet."

He slowly slid an arm around her back. "I thought you came here on a diplomatic mission to meet with the Hokage."

She winked. "That's just a front for my real objective."

He began to lean in closer. "Which is?"

"Making you mine of course."

His lips pulled back to reveal a teasing smile. "I think I should warn you, a lot of women have tried that and failed." He continued to lean in and began to pull her closer as well.

"Minato-kun honey," she whispered as their mouths drew near. "I'm not like any other woman you've ever met."

And with that they began to kiss amid the roses.



## Kushina's evil plan

"Woo hoo, not so shy now is he?" One of them said.

The other maids all giggled and laughed. They were gathered around a third story window that looked down into the rose garden. They had an ideal view of the master and the pretty red head.

"He's never done this before," another of the maids spoke up. "Wonder what makes this one so special."

A different girl had a wicked look in her eye. " I wonder what *else* they've done."

The girls broke into another round of laughter.

"That's enough," a stern voice cut in. "All of you back to your duties."

The girls turned from the window to see Kaede frowning at them. They all quickly got going, returning to their various tasks.

When the others had gone Kaede stepped up to the window and took a look out. What she saw caught her by surprise. Minato had always been a very private person when it came to matters of the heart. Even with his various girlfriends he had never gone any further than holding hands when in public. She hadn't really believed the story about Minato-sama kissing some princess goodbye just as he was leaving Whirlpool. It had seemed too out of character for him. Now she believed though.

Without a sound she left the window to get back to her own work.

---

With a contented sigh she leaned against him and felt his arms snugly wrapped around her. "O.k., I take it back, I'm no longer disappointed." She gave him a sly look. "You definitely know how to take advantage of a girl."

Minato's face blushed. "I haven't done this before with anyone."

"You've never brought a girl out here to see the roses?"

"I've never kissed anyone in the garden before," he said.

"Don't believe you," she said teasingly. "I'll bet you've had a whole line of girls make out with you here."

"No I haven't I swear, you're the first," he said. "You're... you're special."

She laughed. "The last time you told me that I got upset because I thought it was just some line. This time I'm going to assume it's what you really think."

"It is what I really think. I don't know what it is, your smile or your laugh or maybe the way you honestly tell me what you think instead of what you think I want to hear. But there's just something about you that I can't resist."

She turned her face up and grinned. "In that case Minato-kun honey, don't resist."

They began kissing again with the same fervor.

---

Tsunade walked out of the Tower feeling a bit chastened and embarrassed, but otherwise no worse for wear. Sarutobi had essentially decided to try and forget the whole matter. He didn't need the whole village knowing one of the Sannin had tried to kill another. She regretted having to get Sarutobi-sensei involved; she did **not** regret beating the crap out of the disgusting pervert. Outside the Tower was a familiar face waiting for her and her mood immediately improved.

"Dan! When did you get back?" She hurried over to the man she loved. Hugging him and giving him a welcoming kiss.

The silver haired ninja gave her a relaxed grin. "Only a little while ago, I heard you'd gotten in some sort of fight with Jiraiya."

Tsunade sighed, whatever the Hokage wanted the whole village would be talking about what happened. "You might say that, though it wasn't really much of a fight."

"Was he peeping?"

Tsunade looked away feeling embarrassed. Everyone knew Jiraiya's reputation; it wasn't like the idiot tried to hide it, just the opposite in fact. "Yes."

"Is he in the hospital?"

She nodded. "He's in intensive care, but he should live."

Dan looked shocked. "Tsunade..."

"He deserved it! He was peeping on me in the bathhouse!"

"His actions were wrong," Dan agreed. "But don't you think almost killing him too severe a punishment?"

"No!" She snapped. He gave her a look of disappointment. "Don't look at me that way. Doesn't it bother you that, that pervert was looking at your girlfriend?"

"Of course it does, and I'll have a word with him about it later. Nevertheless I wouldn't want him killed for it."

*Wonderful, first the old man and now Dan-kun.* Tsunade thought dejectedly.

"Are you going to heal him?"

"Of course not!"

Dan just looked at her.

"Oh all right! I'll heal him, but only because you ask me too. You're much too forgiving you know that?"

He laughed a little. "Everyone deserves a little forgiveness."

As the two of them headed to Konoha Hospital Tsunade remembered something. *Oh, I forgot about Kushina! I was going to invite her to stay at my home while she's here. Oh well, I'll track her down tomorrow. I'm sure she'll find somewhere else to sleep tonight.*

---

"You want her to spend the night Minato-sama?" Kaede asked. Her usual blank mask firmly in place.

He began to rub the back of his head. "Well you see she doesn't know what arrangements were made for her, and since auntie Tsunade is out of reach I just thought she could stay here for tonight. I mean we do have, what, a hundred and twenty spare bedrooms?"

"One hundred and eighteen Minato-sama."

Minato laughed but got no reaction from her. "So... is it all right if she stays?"

"You sound as though you are asking permission." She gave him a slight bow as though reminding him of her station. "You are the master of this house Minato-sama. If you wish to have her stay then I shall of course find her a place. Oh, and by the way," she produced a cloth. Before he could react Minato was having his mouth wiped with it. "You have lipstick all over your face." She said calmly.

---

"Thank you for your kindness," Kushina said as she followed Kaede to her room for the night.

The old woman looked at her, the tiniest bit of curiosity in those eyes of hers. "There is no need to thank me; all who live here serve

Namikaze. Since my arrival here more than fifty years ago it has been my greatest honor and privilege."

"You and the other servants seem really devoted to Minato-kun." She'd noticed all the smiles and friendly looks he received from them.

"Of the staff no one has been here for less than ten years." She explained. "We have all seen Minato-sama grow from a boy into a man. Many of us, myself included, have known the master since the day of his birth. It is not too much to say that we are devoted to him. Especially as he is the last of his clan. All of us would do anything to help and protect him."

"Well that's good to know," Kushina said approvingly. "But why do you call him Minato-sama and master when it seems that you are so close to each other?"

"He is the master of this house and we are his servants," she said formally. "To address him in any other way would not be proper or respectful Kushina-san."

"Please just call me Kushina."

"As you like... Kushina."

Further efforts at small talk did not produce much. Kushina satisfied herself with just following the woman through the long corridors and up the stairs. They finally arrived at a room all the way in the far east wing of the mansion on the third floor. Looking inside she was it was a large room with a bay window and private bath along with a massive bed.

"So, where does Minato-kun sleep?" Kushina tried to sound indifferent.

"The master's bedroom is on the first floor in the west wing." Kaede said smoothly.

*So you put me as far away from him as possible. "I see."*

"If there is nothing else then I will wish you a good night," Kaede gave her a deep and proper bow. "The staff is available to you twenty four hours a day should you require anything at all we shall provide it for you."

"Thank you."

As soon as Kaede departed Kushina began to rub her hands together evilly. *First floor in the west wing huh? I wonder if there's a sign on the door.*

That night, in the early morning hours, Kushina crept silently out of her room. She had on nothing but an orange night shirt. She had memorized the outlay of the mansion from her walk up from the kitchen. Moving with stealth befitting an ANBU she crossed the darkened corridors and walked down the steps without making a sound or spotting a single soul. The west wing was a copy of the east so she didn't have trouble navigating it. She kept an eye out for some sign of which door was Minato's. If she failed to find anything she would simply search them one by one.

She was creeping along the first floor main corridor when a polite cough froze her in place.

There sitting in a chair in one of the side corridors was Kaede. She seemed to be polishing silverware. "You seem to be lost, can I help you Kushina-san?" She was sitting right in front of one of the bedrooms.

Though there was no sign on the door Kushina was willing to bet it was Minato's. Kaede was sitting outside it like a guard dog. Kushina stood straight up and tried not to blush too badly. "Uh, I uh, was wanting some milk."

"The kitchen is in that direction," Kaede politely pointed back the way she'd come. "There should be an assistant cook there on duty."

"Tha... thank you, I guess I'll be going."

Kaede began folding again. "All who live here serve Namikaze, in whatever way is needed."

"Heh, I'll keep that in mind. By the way, if you should ever come to Whirlpool let me introduce you to my uncle Saishu. The two of you would probably get along really well."

Kushina headed back to bed, her evil plan foiled and Minato's chastity saved.

---

## Omake

"Minato-sama," Kaede spoke in her normal detached voice. "This was just delivered to the front gate and brought in."

There was a six foot high birthday cake with 'Happy Birthday Minato-kun' written in pink icing.

"But..." Minato began, only to be interrupted as Mai and Dita burst out of the top of the cake wearing nothing but some frosting over their private parts.

"Happy Birthday Minato-kun!" Both girls cried out in unison.

Minato stared at the two of them and his face went as red as tomato. "My birthday's not for another three months." he blurted out.

Dita laughed as she removed some of the frosting just below one of her nipples. "We decided not to wait. Now then," she licked the frosting off her finger. "Are you ready for your special birthday present from the two of us?"

"And just what sort of gift would that be?" Kaede asked in a voice as heavy lead. She turned to Minato. "Minato-sama, don't you have a training session with your team scheduled?"

Looking embarrassed he rubbed the back of his head. "Heh, I almost forgot." he turned apologetically to the two women. "I'm very sorry ladies, but I have to go."

Both women cried out as he left the kitchen.

"Now then, I think I have the perfect punishment in mind for sneaking into the Namikaze mansion uninvited and unannounced. You do know that by law the clan is allowed to deal with trespassers any way they see fit?"

Both kunoichi were looking at the little old woman with mounting panic. She was famous for being Minato's gatekeeper and for shielding him from the excesses of his fangirls. It was also known that if you defied her you had zero chance of ever being with him.

"Wha... what do you have in mind?" Mai asked nervously.

---

Kushina was returning to the Namikaze estates when she spotted a huge crowd there right in front of the gate. Curious as to what could be going on she pushed through the mass of people up to the front. When she got a clear view she stopped and her jaw dropped open.

There was a huge birthday cake and apparently free slices were being given away to the passersby. But she didn't think the size of the crowd was only for the free food.

Handing out the cake were two young women wearing nothing but frosting. They were NAKED otherwise. And standing behind them supervising was none other than Kaede.

"You don't leave until every last piece has been given away," the old woman announced.

Kushina shook her head. Was this another local tradition like public bathing? The people in Konoha certainly were a strange bunch. "Oh well," she said. "I guess I'll have some cake."





# What's mine

**Author Notes:** This story and The True Monster are up for some fan fiction awards. So please go to [www. teamdarkhope. synthasite. com](http://www.teamdarkhope.synthasite.com) to vote. I am an egomaniac and only feel love through the positive reinforcement of strangers. Please help feed my neurosis!

---

The hospital door opened and Minato popped his head in. "Sensei? How are you feeling?"

The private hospital room was filled to overflowing with flowers and cards and balloons. No doubt most of them from adoring women. Jiraiya himself was lying in the slim bed in a full body cast. A single I.V. sending him a steady supply of pain medicine. The only part of his body not in a cast was his right arm. Somehow or other Tsunade and Kushina had left that part of him intact. Despite his situation Jiraiya flashed his star pupil a friendly smile. "Hey kid, good to see you. You come by to check in on your old teacher?"

Minato stepped into the room and shut the door behind him. "I wanted to make sure you were all right," he let out a low whistle. "I guess auntie was *really* mad this time huh?"

Jiraiya chuckled. "Some women just don't know how to express their real feelings."

"Uh, sensei, don't you think when she was beating you almost to death those *were* her real feelings?"

Jiraiya tried to shake his head but the neck brace prevented that. "You know I was just trying to pay her a compliment."

"She doesn't see it that way," Minato grimaced. "For that matter neither does Kushina."

"Who?"

---

"So this is where I'll be staying while I'm in Konoha?" The bedroom was spacious and came with its own bath. Even so Kushina couldn't help but sound despondent.

Tsunade picked up on that as well as her gloomy outlook. "Sorry if being a guest in my mansion doesn't suit you. Maybe I can ask and see if the old man would like to take you in."

"Oh it's not that," Kushina sounded embarrassed. "I appreciate you allowing me to stay with you Tsunade-chan. It's just, well; I was sort of hoping to stay somewhere else."

Tsunade gave her a teasing grin. "I can guess where, but it's not possible. Minato can't have you staying with him right now."

"But why not?" Kushina demanded. "He and his team were guests in my home when they were in Whirlpool. Wouldn't it be proper for me to stay in his home while I am in Konoha?"

"If he had family living with him I'd agree with you," Tsunade said. "But except for the staff he is the only one living there. Were he to have you living with him rumors would start to spread like wildfire. Especially give the rumors that followed him home."

Kushina flushed a little. She knew what rumors Tsunade was referring to. "I don't care what people think."

"Well, I happen to feel that way too... most of the time. But right now Minato is trying to become the next Hokage. He absolutely can't afford any scandal, so I'm afraid you'll have to stay here and put up with me. Now, let's go have lunch, there's someone I want to introduce you to."

---

"The red head with Tsunade was the little girl I met that time?" Jiraiya laughed. "Well she certainly has grown up hasn't she?"

"Sensei," Minato said stiffly. "Please don't talk about her that way. And please don't ever try and do any research on her. If you did I don't know if I'd be able to forgive you."

Jiraiya lifted an eyebrow and gave his beloved student an amused look. Minato was twenty. He'd known the kid for eight years now. Jiraiya had never tried to hide his interests. While Minato was often embarrassed by them he had never really complained about his looking at any particular girl before. "So I guess I know who the girl you were kissing in Whirlpool was." Seeing Minato blush told him all he needed.

"She is a very special person and I'd like you not to bother her again sensei."

"O.k. kid I get it," he waved his good hand in defeat. "I wouldn't ever want you to get really made at me; kami knows Tsunade is bad enough. I give you my word; I won't ever try and look at Kushina again."

"Thanks sensei, and while you're at it why not give up peeping on Tsunade too?"

"Hell no! Have you ever seen those breasts?! Looked at them in their full glory?! Such a sight is well worth dying for!"

Minato stood there and sweat dropped. *Geez, he really is a super pervert. I should start calling him ero-sensei.* He thought about it for a second. *Nah, knowing him he'd take it as a compliment.* He decided to try and change the subject. "So how long will you be in the hospital?"

"A whole damn month," Jiraiya grumbled. "Even after all the emergency medical jutsus that were used on me the doctors say I need to recover naturally or my wounds could tear open. What the hell am I going to do for a month stuck here? I'll die of boredom."

Minato shrugged. "Why don't you try writing a book? Haven't you always talked about doing that?"

Jiraiya paused and thought about it. "Hmmm, well I do still have my writing hand. Maybe I will."

"Well if you do let me read it, I'm sorry but I have to go meet some people for lunch."

---

"So is the pervert in a lot of pain?" Tsunade asked.

"No, he seems to be fine," Minato said.

"Too bad," Tsunade snarled and downed a shot of sake.

"Tsunade," Dan chided. "Please don't sound so vindictive."

"Sorry," she muttered and poured herself another round.

"I still can't believe Tsunade gave you her grandfather's necklace," Kushina said. "Did you know that you could buy two gold mines and the mountains on top of them with that necklace?"

Dan smiled a bit sheepishly. "She's mentioned it once or twice."

Kushina turned her full attention on Tsunade. "Wow, and you just gave it to him. You must really, really be in love with him huh Tsunade?"

The blonde woman turned a deep shade of red while the men at the table both had a good laugh. "Well... yes I... I love him very much."

It was an interesting change of pace to see someone as bold and straightforward as Tsunade suddenly acting shyly. It reminded Kushina of how Minato acted around her sometimes.

Seeing her embarrassment Dan placed his hand over hers. "And I love you with all my heart, my Tsunade."

Seeing the way Dan and Tsunade were smiling at one another Kushina moved her chair over right next to Minato's and took hold of his arm. "What about you Minato-kun honey?"

"Huh?" Minato looked at her sudden nearness with a lot of nervousness. The four of them were having lunch in one of Konoha's finest restaurants. Many of the people were watching and straining to hear what was being said. For that matter Tsunade and Dan were suddenly looking very interested as well.

"Aren't you going to tell me how much you love me?" She said in a sweet voice, her big green eyes looking intently into his.

He gulped audibly. "Kushina, I... I really...."

"Yes?" She asked eagerly.

"Minato-kun! What are you doing here?" Before Minato could turn around a large breasted blonde kunoichi had glomped onto his back. "Hey sweetie! Where have you been? I..." Dita suddenly stopped as she felt a murderous killer intent being directed at her. Standing over her was a red headed kunoichi with a foreign hitai-ite around her forehead. The woman had a hand resting on a sword and looked like she was itching to take it out.

"Minato-kun honey," Kushina said in a voice that sounded as pleasant as fingernails on a chalkboard. "Who is this?"

"Her name is Dita and I'm Mai," a pink haired girl announced as she approached the table. "We're very close friends of Minato-kun's. We've known him since ninja academy days. And who might *you* be?"

Dita released her hold on Minato and stood as tall as she could and pushed out her chest. "You're not from here, are you some *acquaintance* of Minato-kun's?"

Smiling back at the two interlopers Kushina let her hand drop off her sword. *Different enemies require different tactics.* "Me?" Kushina said sweetly. As the two girls, Tsunade, Dan, and the whole restaurant watched she dropped neatly into Minato's lap and cuddled up against his chest. "I'm Minato-kun's girrrrrrrlfriend. Aren't I Minato-kun honey?"

Both girls gaped at her horrified as Tsunade laughed and Minato squirmed a bit.

"Is that so Minato-kun?" Dita asked.

Minato looked at Dita and Mai and then looked back at Kushina's grinning face. He knew there was only one thing to say. "Yes, she's my girlfriend."

---

After that memorable run in Dita and Mai took a nearby table and had lunch. The entire time they kept an eye on Minato. Kushina noticed and sent them plenty of smiles and even an occasional friendly wave. She remained sitting on his lap for the rest of their lunch, shamelessly hugging him and feeding him his meal.

Dita and Mai had never been so jealous of anyone in their lives.

When they finally finished Minato and Kushina left the restaurant arm in arm. When they were gone Mai looked over to her best friend / worst enemy. "Just so we're clear, we hate her right?"

"Yeah!" Dita said furiously.

---

"Why did you do that?" Minato asked as they left.

"Do what?" Kushina said trying to sound innocent.

"You know," he said.

"Didn't I tell you before Minato-kun honey? I don't like to share what belongs to me."

Despite being embarrassed by her antics he still couldn't help but smile. He just didn't seem able to stay mad at her. "I never said I belonged to you."

She squeezed his arm just a little tighter. "I never said I was giving you a choice. Now why don't you give me another tour of the rose gardens?"

Laughing they headed towards the Namikaze estates arm in arm.

---

Unnoticed, two messenger hawks arrived at the Tower within twenty minutes of each other. One had been sent from Grass country and one from rain. Messages were normally transported by ninja courier. The hawks were only used in cases of emergency.

The messages were swiftly decoded and presented to the Hokage. Sarutobi read the news with little outward reaction. He'd been expecting this for the last several weeks. The rock nins had just launched two massive assaults. This was the Tsuchikage's final all out bid to break into Fire country and win the war.

The Hokage turned to one of his Chunin guards. "Please have messengers sent out to gather all commanders for an emergency meeting here at the Tower."

"Hai Hokage-sama!" The Chunin vanished in a swirl of wind and leaves.

Sarutobi leaned back in his seat and puffed at his pipe. *What a shame*, he thought sadly. *It seems the Whirlpool ninja aren't going to get the chance to assist us in the field after all.*

The decisive final battles of the Third Great Ninja war had begun.



## Eve of battle

They were on their favorite bench having another protracted make out session in the rose garden. She was curled up on his lap with his lips and tongue teasing her mouth. One of his hands was resting on her ass while he was playing with her breasts with the other. Some of the shyness she'd had to deal with was starting to slip away. The way he was touching her was starting to *really* turn her on. Even though they were outside she was thinking about pulling down her body suit. At least enough to give him free access to her breasts.

"Minato-kun honey," she said in a naughty voice. "How about I..."

"Minato!" A man's voice called as a ninja in an owl's mask suddenly materialized right in front of them.

"What?" Instinctively Minato jumped to his feet.

With the unfortunate fact of dumping Kushina out of his lap and onto the ground. "Hey! Could you be a little more careful?" She scrambled up to her feet and sent him an annoyed look.

He smiled sheepishly and rubbed the back of his head. "Ah, sorry about that."

"Please forgive this interruption Minato-san," the ANBU bowed his head in apology. "But you are ordered to the Tower immediately to take part in an emergency meeting."

"An emergency meeting?" Minato asked. "What's going on? Has something happened?"

"I am sorry Minato-san but I can say no more." The ANBU performed a hand sign and was gone in a swirl of wind and leaves."

He turned to her apologetically. "I'm sorry, but unscheduled meetings are never about good news. I have to go."

"I understand," she was ANBU herself and knew that a ninja's duty had to take priority over everything else. She leaned forward and gave him a quick kiss. "I'll return to Tsunade's home. See me whenever you can."

"I will," he promised. He vanished in a flash of yellow light.

---

Only twenty ninja were assembled to meet with their Hokage. These were the Jonin elite of the village. They were the commanders who would lead Sarutobi's forces out into battle. Every one of them were battle hardened and experienced in all the harsh lessons of war. They represented the best of the best. And among their ranks three stood before all the rest.

Orochimaru, Tsunade, and Minato waited calmly in front of the other Jonin.

"Thank you all for answering the summons so swiftly," Sarutobi said with his usual relaxed air. "I have just received word that two huge new attacks have been launched by the forces of Iwa. In both Grass and Rain country they are driving to break into Fire country and bring this war onto our own soil. This must be prevented at all cost."

"Ku, ku, ku," Orochimaru sounded pleased. "Finally a chance to beat them completely and win a total victory."

Tsunade turned to him with an annoyed sneer. "You sound damn happy. You do realize that we're going to lose more people don't you?"

"Of course," he said pleasantly. "After all, if you want to eat bacon you have to kill the hog. Such squeamish nature Tsunade, it really doesn't belong in a ninja you know."

"I've seen as much bloodshed as you Orochimaru," Tsunade said hotly. "I've seen enough pointless death to not want to see more."

"Hmmm, well perhaps you should stay here where it's safe then. I will fight for the glory of my village."

"I'll go out and fight too," Tsunade said. "But unlike you I'll be doing it to try and save lives."

"Whatever our views it is our duty to fight the enemies of our village," Minato said trying to ease some of the tension. Lately the two old teammates had been growing further and further apart. The comradeship of their youth was slowly being forgotten. "Hokage-sama since we are facing attack on two fronts is there any chance of reinforcement from our army in Wind?"

The Hokage slowly shook his head back. "I'm afraid not, I dare not pull any more forces from there until the war with Suna is settled. I do have hope that they will be ready to sue for peace soon."

Orochimaru snorted. "We have been hearing that for weeks but the Suna nin are still fighting." Though he was the only one to say it the nods from most of the others only proved they thought the same. Even Tsunade did not try and disagree.

"They may truly be at the end of their strength," Sarutobi said. "I have reports that the Suna civilians have begun riots and are even burning their possessions as a sign they are ready for peace."

"Ku, ku, ku," Orochimaru laughed lightly. "Too bad the Council of Wind doesn't feel the same." With the disappearance of the Third Kazekage the Council had taken power and were trying to prosecute the war. But without the power and leadership of the Kazekage Suna's forces had been getting worn down by the superior power of Leaf. But as long as the war continued though Konoha had no choice but to keep a large army down in Wind country.

"Well even without reinforcement from Wind we should still have enough to stop them." Minato said.

"Of course," Tsunade smiled. "Why don't we just have Minato here stand in front of the Rock forces? They'll retreat on sight and that will be the end of it."

The good natured laughter from the other Jonins showed how much they appreciated the little joke. They all took great pride in the fact that Minato was so feared by Iwa that they had a retreat on sight order for him.

Along among them Orochimaru did not laugh. "I doubt we can depend on our enemies being that cowardly. We may actually have to fight Tsunade."

"We will indeed have to fight," Sarutobi agreed. "It would have been good had *all* the Sannin been available for this." He sent Tsunade a pointed look. "But we will have to deal with the enemy with what is available. I have complete faith in all of you and in the Will of Fire which I know drives each of you. I know that the village will never be conquered so long as our ninja are ready to do whatever they must to protect our beloved Konoha."

Every ninja present nodded their agreement with their Hokage's words.

With that done he began issuing assignments to the commanders. "Orochimaru, I am giving you overall command of all forces in Rain. I trust you to lead our forces to victory."

Orochimaru bowed low. "I thank you for this trust and promise you will not be disappointed Hokage-sama."

"Tsunade, I know your feelings. Feel free to act as medical nin with our army. Save as many lives as you can. Every ninja is precious to me and to this village."

Tsunade nodded. "Yes Hokage-sama." She was very happy with the assignment. She would much rather use her skills saving lives

instead of taking them. She also knew that she would keep close to Dan's unit, just in case.

"Minato, you will be in over all command of our forces in Grass. Beyond that I am counting on you personally to act as a reinforcement to our forces there."

Minato bowed. "Yes Hokage-sama."

Orochimaru glanced in Minato's direction. *How interesting, we will both be generals in our theaters of operation.* He glanced at his former teacher and current Hokage. *Is this one of your little tests Sarutobi-sensei? That's fine; I've always exceeded in passing your tests. I'll show you how much stronger a leader I truly am.*

"Also Minato, I think the time has finally come to promote Kakashi to Jonin. I have a specific mission in mind for him and the others in your squad."

"Yes Hokage-sama," Minato answered. He still had some concerns about Kakashi's ability to lead. But if the Hokage wanted to promote him Minato did not feel they were good enough reasons to try and argue against it.

Sarutobi continued to issue assignments to the commanders present. Of the twenty present fifteen were ordered to Rain and only five to Grass. It was obvious he was relying heavily on Minato's skill to win the day.

With the assignments made they were all informed they would have to leave early the next morning.

---

"We'll meet at our regular sport at 6 a.m." Minato told his team. Obito and Rin looked a bit nervous at the prospect of heavy action. Kakashi took the news, as well as his promotion, in stride.

Kakashi looked over at Obito. "This is important so can you *try* and not be late?"

"Shut up jerk," Obito said. "I won't be late."

"We'll see," Kakashi said dryly. "Is there anything else sensei?"

"No," Minato shook his head. "Just get a good night's sleep and be ready to go long and hard for the next few days."

Kakashi nodded and shunshinned away.

"Hey Obito," Rin said excitedly. "Tomorrow let's give Kakashi his gifts to celebrate his promotion!" She looked at Minato. "You too sensei!"

Minato smiled and nodded. "Sure."

"Gifts?" Obito asked with a frown. "Did we agree to do that?"

"Obito don't tell me you haven't gotten him anything! We've been planning this for weeks! I've made my gift for him by hand, if you haven't gotten him anything yet go to the shops and buy him something!"

"O.k. fine," he said wearily. "I'll be sure to get him something before I go home."

"Do you promise?" Rin asked suspiciously.

"Yeah, yeah I promise!" Obito headed off feeling annoyed not only with Kakashi's promotion but with Rin's insistence that it be celebrated.

---

"Lady Tsunade!" Shizune said excitedly.

Tsunade smiled at the twelve year old niece of her lover. "Hello Shizune-chan, how are your advanced classes coming?"

"Really well," Shizune said excitedly. "I really like studying biology and anatomy. I'll graduate soon; you haven't forgotten your promise have you?"

Tsunade reached down and rubbed the top of the little girl's. "Of course not, if you pass all your advanced classes then I'll take you as my apprentice and teach you to be a medic nin."

"Yeah!" Shizune said excitedly and turned to her uncle. "Did you hear that uncle Dan I'm going to be a super medic nin just like Lady Tsunade!"

"I'm sure you will," he said.

"Shizune honey, could you go home on your own? I'd like to have some time with Dan-kun."

"Sure, see you later uncles Dan, Lady Tsunade!"

The two adults watched as the young girl ran off.

"I pray this damn war is over before she graduates," Tsunade said.

Dan looked at her. It was easy to see her mood was much more serious than usual. "Something wrong?"

She nodded. "You'll be getting orders soon to go to Rain country, a major fight is brewing."

"I see, in that case," he reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Want to have our usual good bye before I leave?"

"Well I'll be leaving too, but yes, I can't think of a better way to spend our last night in the village."

---

"What did you say?" Kushina asked with a blush.

"Dan and I will be having sex in my room." Tsunade said. "If you disturb us for any reason short of an enemy invasion I will have to kill you. This is not an exaggeration. This is not a joke. If you disturb me and my man... dead. Are we clear?"

"Ah sure," Kushina said feeling embarrassed. "So the two of you are going out on a mission?"

"That's right, but it won't be just us most of the ninja in the village will be leaving tomorrow morning."

She felt a sudden fear grab hold of her heart. "What about Minato?"

"Him too," Tsunade said.

"Excuse me, I have to go somewhere." Kushina left in a hurry.

---

Sarutobi frowned and shook his head. "No, absolutely not, and that is final."

"But why not?" Kushina pleaded. "I'm a skilled ninja and I've fought the rock nins more times than I can count. I could be a help to your forces."

"I do not doubt that," Sarutobi said. "But at the moment you are a diplomat here on behalf of your village. While you are here your safety is my responsibility. I cannot send you into battle."

"The plan was always to have me join with the Whirlpool army once it arrived," Kushina pointed out. "I was always going to fight the damn rock nins."

"That may well be so. But at that point you would no longer have been a diplomat; you would have become a soldier again. So long as you are a diplomat I cannot allow you to fight."

Nothing Kushina could say would budge him from that point of view.

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When she had finally given up on convincing the Hokage it was already late at night. She went to the Namikaze mansion where Minato was already in bed resting up for the difficult days ahead. She asked the servant who greeted her at the door to take her to Minato's room. She was not surprised when he brought her to the same room she had been to last time. She was also not surprised to find Kaede seated outside the door, this time knitting.

The head servant set aside her work and rose to her feet. "Greetings Kushina-san, the master is already asleep. Is there anything I can help you with?"

Kushina straightened her back and took a deep breath. "I hear that Minato-kun is about to leave on a very dangerous assignment."

"That seems to be the case," Kaede agreed calmly.

"He... he may be hurt or... or even worse."

"That is always the case with each mission," Kaede replied solemnly. "Such is the fate of shinobi."

"I... I would like to... ah give him something. A gift." *Damn this is embarrassing!* Talking to Kaede about this really felt like she was talking to Minato-kun's mom.

"A gift?" Kaede said coolly. She extended her hand. "Please give it to me and I assure you he will get it before he departs."

Kushina could feel her face start to go red. She dug her heel into the floor and pressed her index fingers together. "Ah, it's ah... not that sort of gift."

"Oh really?" Kaede said calmly. "What sort of gift is it?"

"It's ah, well, I sorta want to ah, give him," she gulped. "Me." The last word came out in a small voice.

Kaede just stood there looking at her with that expressionless face. "I see, is that all?"

Kushina's jaw dropped. "Is that all?!"

"Do you imagine you are the first woman to come here offering herself to Minato-sama prior to a dangerous mission? Some nights I have had to deal with two or three of them."

Kushina just stood there shocked.

"So was there anything else?"

She looked down defeated. "No, I guess not, I just wanted to spend the night making love to him."

The door to the room suddenly opened and there was Minato standing in a robe.

Kaede turned about, real surprise obvious on her face. "Minato-sama," she bowed to him. "Can I help with something?"

Minato looked uneasy and was rubbing the back of his head. "Kaede, if you don't mind, just for tonight, could you not watch my door?"

Kaede quickly wiped the surprise from her face and gave him a second bow as she gathered her knitting things. "As you wish Minato-sama." She turned to leave. "Please do try and get *some* sleep tonight."

Kushina stood there as though rooted to the spot.

Minato remained in the doorways grinning at her uncomfortably.

Finally he was the one to speak. "So are you going to give me that gift?"

"Yeah," she entered his room and shut the door.

They began kissing and groping as they made their way over to the bed. His robe dropped to the floor revealing he had nothing else on. It took a bit more effort for Kushina to get her bodysuit off but she finally managed it. With his strong hands he placed her on his bed and climbed in on top of her. His mouth began to lick and then suck her breasts while his hands roamed all over her body including the spot between her legs.

"This... this is my first time," she gasped. The way he was licking her was starting to feel *really* good. "Please be gentle with me."

He brought his face up and kissed her. "This is my first time too," he told her.

"I love you Minato-kun honey," she said to him suddenly desperate that he know. "I really truly love you."

He stopped for a moment and just smiled at her with that big smile that she loved. "And I love you Kushina-chan, my red haired girl."

He brought his lips down on hers and sealed his words with a kiss.

---

Early the next morning Minato walked outside to find all his servants lined up waiting for him. This was a tradition whenever he left on a mission. As he left each servant wished him luck.

Kaede was the last one in the line and the last to bow and wish him luck. "Come home safely Minato-sama, all our prayers and hopes go with you."

"Thank you Kaede, and ah, about last night..."

"Minato-sama," Kaede said politely. "You are master of this house; you do not have to explain anything to me."

"Thank you Kaede," he said with relief.

"And I do suppose that twenty years is a long time to be a virgin."

"Yes," he got moving quickly trying to hide his embarrassment.

A little ways past the servants Kushina waited patiently. "You better come back safe, otherwise I'm going to the afterlife and track you down."

He smiled and put his arms around her. "A ninja can't ever promise to return, I can only promise to do my best to come back to you."

"I guess that will have to do." Together they kissed right out in the open.

After that Minato was gone to meet his team.

---

Kushina stood there sadly once he had gone.

"There is no need to be sad," Kaede said as she approached her. "Minato-sama has never lost a fight or a battle. He will certainly return again safe and sound."

Kushina managed a weak smile. "I'm sure he will."

"Do you know the first thing he always eats whenever he returns is my special ramen?" Kaede told her. "I am the only one who knows how to make it, it is a family recipe and I have never shared it with anyone."

Kushina nodded. "He's told me about it, he really loves the ramen you make for him."

"Would you like me to teach you how to make it?"

"Really?" Kushina looked at the woman.

Kaede nodded with her usual passive expression. "I am not getting any younger and *someone* will have to make it for him when I am

gone."

Kushina turned to the maid and bowed to her. "Kaede-san, I would be most greatly honored if you would teach me how to make your ramen."

"I am glad to hear that Kushina," the old woman said. "Now come with me and I'll show you all that you need to know."

# Welcome home

Victory.

Konoha had triumphed. Hanzo, the leader of Rain country, had already surrendered and made peace. A delegation had arrived just a few days ago from Suna. There was an armistice in place and they were here to negotiate an end to their war with Leaf. There was still no word from Iwa that they were quitting, but people all seemed to think it was just a matter of time now. Their armies had been driven out of Grass and Rain and the Leaf nins would soon be able to bring up large numbers of reinforcements from the Suna front. If the Tsuchikage did come to terms soon there would be a leaf invasion of Earth country.

Most of the people in Konoha were in high spirits and felt the war was as good as over. Kushina knew she should be dancing in the streets given the how many damn rock nins were dead and how they were now facing defeat, a defeat her own village had helped to bring about. Somehow though she couldn't feel very happy.

She was sitting on the little bench she and Minato liked to use and just staring up into the night sky. She liked coming here to the rose garden, it was easily her favorite spot in all of Konoha. That was because it was the place that reminded her most of him.

It had been three weeks since Minato, Tsunade, and the others had set out. She hadn't heard anything from them. That was normal, it wasn't as though they could easily send messages while at the front. And though all reports were that casualties had been very heavy there was no word that either Minato or Tsunade had been hurt. She was sure that if they had been there would have been word. In this case no news was definitely good news. All the same, she would not be able to feel really happy until he was back with her again.

With a heartfelt sigh she got up and began the long trek back to Tsunade's home.

---

She was at Tsunade's doing a little sword practice. She had finished the negotiations with the Hokage. If for some reason this war continued much longer there would be a small army of Whirlpool nin invading Earth country. A small part of her was actually wanting to see that happen. She had lead dozens of raids into earth territory and watched settlements, towns, and individual farm houses burn. But even as she'd been doing it she'd understood it was nothing but a nuisance to the damn rock nins. Now to be part of *real* invasion, to be driving deep into Earth and trying to take Iwa, now *that* would be something.

But most of her was eager to have the fighting end. She understood only too well that no matter how skilled a ninja might be there were no guarantees. She thought of Shinzou and of Hideo. She hoped she never lost anyone else who was close to her like that.

She was going through some exercises when she spotted Tsunade. The woman was just standing there. It was as if she had just gone to the store for some milk. Kushina did a double take and ran over to her to give her friend a hug.

"Tsunade! When did you get back? Did Minato-kun come back with you?" She asked excitedly.

It was only after she'd hugged the woman and spoken that she realized something was wrong. Tsunade was just standing there. Her shoulders were slumped and she had a weary defeated look in her eyes.

And around her neck she wore her grandfather's necklace.

Seeing that Kushina knew. "Oh Tsunade," she whispered. "Dan?"

Hearing his name Tsunade choked out a sob and reached out to grab her friend like a lifeline. She began crying and shaking. Tsunade was one of the strongest women Kushina had ever met, but at that moment she seemed as helpless as a lost child. Kushina understood. She put her arms around Tsunade and whispered comfortingly to her. "It's all right, it's all right."

---

Minato returned home with Rin and Kakashi. Upon his arrival all the people near the gate let loose with a loud cheer. Embarrassed Minato waved to them a bit, acknowledging them and thanking them.

Kakashi turned to Minato. He had taken to wearing his hitai-ite at an angle so that it covered his left eye. In his right hand he clutched the yellow goggles his teammate Obito had treasured. During the trip back Kakashi had been very quiet barely saying two words. Rin had tried talking to him but had not gotten him to respond.

She looked at him and wondered what she was supposed.

'I abandoned you,' Kakashi had told her. 'I'm nothing but trash.'

She'd tried to tell him that she understood, he'd been carrying out the mission. She didn't blame him for his decision or for what had happened to Obito. *Please forgive yourself Kakashi-kun; Obito forgave you and so did I.*

"Sensei, may I be dismissed?" Kakashi asked.

Minato nodded immediately. "Of course, both of you are free for the rest of the day."

Kakashi nodded and quickly performed a shunshin, disappearing in a swirl of leaves and mist.

"Kakashi..." Rin tried to call out to him but he was already gone.



Minato smiled and placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Give him time Rin," he said gently. "He's gone through a lot and he'll need to sort things out. Just give him some time and be there when he does need you."

She looked up at her teacher and nodded. "Sensei... I'm sorry that I let myself be captured. If I hadn't..."

"There's nothing to apologize for Rin," his tone was kind but firm. "You were on a dangerous mission going up against skilled and veteran opponents. What happened was not your fault any more than it was Kakashi's or Obito's. If anyone is responsible it is me."

"But you weren't even there sensei! And if you hadn't returned when you did Kakashi and I would be dead now too!"

"I was the one who trained you. I was your commander. If I had done a better job..." He couldn't help but wonder what might have been if he had just gotten through those two boys better than he had. He knew it was a regret that would never leave him. "In any case I need to report to the Tower. Go home and rest Rin you've earned it."

The girl nodded and trudged off.

Minato in turn leapt away and began running over the roof tops towards the Tower.

---

When Minato arrived at the Hokage Tower the absolute last thing he'd expected to find were enemy ninja. But right there in the main lobby were three ninja dressed in grayish tan clothing wearing turbans and Sand hitai-ites. Spotting them he stiffened and his hand automatically reached for a kunai.

"There's no need to be nervous Minato-san," a nearby ANBU with a raven mask said. "These men are a delegation from Suna. That one," he pointed to the oldest looking nin. "Is named Senya and is a member of the Council of Wind."

"So they've finally decided to give up?"

"Looks that way," the ANBU said.

"Well I'm glad to hear it, though it would have been better if they could have done it a month ago." Now that he was looking he noted that there were several ANBU in the lobby. They were not exactly guarding the Suna nin but seemed to just be standing close by. "I assume they've been searched?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" The ANBU replied. "When they meet the Hokage they won't have anything more lethal than a pen."

Even that was not a total guarantee. A ninja *was* a weapon. Of course if they'd come here on a suicide mission while pretending to be a peace delegation Suna would be signing its own death warrant. There were few truly unforgivable crimes in the shinobi world, but that was one of them.

"I suppose the Hokage wanted to confer with all his war leaders," the ANBU continued. "Right now he is meeting with Orochimaru-san."

"Is that so?" Minato replied. *I wonder if that's a sign that the Hokage still values Orochimaru the most? Well if he does there's nothing I can do about it.*

---

Sarutobi was sitting behind his desk calmly puffing his pipe. His favorite student was standing before him smiling and at ease. He'd just spent the last fifteen minutes going over the campaign in Rain that had ended in Danzo's surrender and Iwa's retreat back into their own territory. By his own account it had been a very bloody and brutal campaign with high losses. Some of those losses had been unavoidable given their opposition. But they had been compounded by the constant attacks Orochimaru had ordered. Many of the attacks had been straightforward assaults against well defended positions. He had ignored opportunities to try flank attacks or surprise, preferring to rely on brute force. It had been effective

enough, but had cost more lives. Orochimaru did not seem to care about the cost so long as he got the results he wanted. That bothered Sarutobi, as did something else.

"I have reports that you allowed your summons to attack undefended villages and actually eat the inhabitants."

"Ku, ku, ku," Orochimaru chuckled. He found humor in his sensei's discomfort. "Manda always demands a sacrifice of one hundred humans. What could I do?"

"You have other summons that don't require human sacrifice," Sarutobi tried to keep the anger from his voice. "You might have used one of them and not slaughtered helpless civilians."

"Hundreds of thousands if not millions have already been slaughtered," Orochimaru said pleasantly. "What are a few more if they help us win victories?"

*He sees nothing wrong with it at all. Sarutobi thought. He does not see anything wrong in killing unarmed civilians.* Sarutobi leaned back in his seat. "I have a question for you Orochimaru. Out in the lobby is the delegation from Suna. They have come here seeking terms. Tell me, if you were Hokage what terms would you offer them?"

"Unconditional surrender," he said instantly. "All Suna nin would have to agree to relocate both themselves and their families to Konoha and agree to become Leaf nin. Any who refuse would have to be killed. Suna would be burnt to the ground after we'd stripped everything of value from it."

Sarutobi blinked. "Those are hard terms. What would you do if they were refused?"

Orochimaru laughed. "Annihilate Suna of course. Once they realize those are their only options they'll agree to surrender."

"I see, well thank you for telling me your opinion."

---

Sarutobi was listening to Minato's report. He too had suffered heavy losses. But with a force only a third as large as his opponent's he driven rock forces out of Grass. He'd handled many of the fights completely on his own relying on the Hiraishin. He had destroyed bridges and supply depots hampering Iwa's efforts to keep their forces in the field. He had also run brilliant campaign relying on speed and surprise to keep the larger Iwa forces in constant confusion. But what most impressed Sarutobi was how deeply Minato regretted the losses. He spoke of Obito and his personal regrets that he'd not been able to save one of his precious students.

*Would Orochimaru feel that way if he lost Anko? Or would he view it as a necessary sacrifice and begin looking for a new apprentice?* Sarutobi feared he knew the answer.

"I have a question for you Minato. Out in the lobby is the delegation from Suna. They have come here seeking terms. Tell me, if you were Hokage what terms would you offer them?"

"They would have to pay reparations and agree to exchange of all prisoners," Minato replied. "Beyond that I would ask for nothing more."

The Hokage looked at him in surprise. Given what a weak position Suna was in most of the Council were calling for much harder terms. None of them were suggesting they destroy Suna. But they did want to impose restrictions, such as limiting their total number of ninja and denying them missions outside Wind country. "Why be so generous?"

"I believe in the long term Konoha is best served by having friends and allies instead of defeated enemies waiting for a chance at revenge. I don't believe we have much hope of making Iwa a friend no matter what we do. But if we treat Suna fairly I really believe we might be able to make them real allies one day."

"I see, well thank you for telling me your opinion."

---

When Minato finally made it home he was relieved to see the servants in a line outside waiting for him.

"Welcome home Minato-sama," Kaede said and bowed gracefully before him. "There is ramen waiting for you inside."

"Thank you Kaede, I'm starving." He headed in to the dining room. When he got inside he saw two large bowls of steaming hot ramen waiting for him. As well as a certain kunoichi.

She ran up and hugged him fiercely and possessively. She kissed him and refused to let go even after. "Welcome home Minato-kun honey!"

Smiling he kissed her and held her as tightly as he could. All the sorrows and the pain of the last few weeks were forgotten for just a bit. He was happy to have come home to her, his red haired girl.

He wanted to always return home to her.

## The Fourth Hokage

She slowly opened her eyes. Lying in the bed beside her was Minato-kun. *What a wonderful way to wake up.* She leaned over and placed a soft kiss on those lips. She watched as those amazing blue eyes opened and looked at her.

"Good morning Minato-kun honey."

"Good morning Kushina," he gave her a kiss and let his hands caress her beneath the blankets.

"Ooooooh," she moaned a little with his touching her breasts.

He rolled over a bit so that he was lying on top and began nibbling her neck.

"You're really turning me on right now," she whispered and began to rub herself against him. "You better not just be teasing me."

"I'm not," he promised. With slow ease she felt him enter her body.

"Ahhh," she gave a shuddering little cry. She could feel him filling her and begin that wonderful motion that always drove her insane. His tongue entered her mouth and his hands began squeezing her just a little as his own excitement began to mount.

*Oh yes, she thought as the pleasure started. What a wonderful way to start the day.*

---

Following breakfast Minato left for a special meeting of the Council. It had been a month since his and Tsunade's return. The delegation from Iwa had departed the day before and the one from Suna a couple weeks earlier. The Third Great Ninja war was finally over after four long bitter years. Her village had survived while Konoha had really triumphed, both Iwa and Suna had agreed to pay reparations

and there was talk of an alliance with Sand. Tonight there would be a massive celebration to mark the return of peace and to rejoice in Leaf's victory. She would be going to the Tower with Minato to celebrate. Since she had the time she decided to go out and do some shopping.

On her way to the market district she could feel their eyes on her. She could see their disapproving looks. She knew what they called her behind her back. Whore, slut, tramp, and the like. Minato had asked her to come stay with him after he returned and she'd said yes immediately. She felt a little bad about leaving Tsunade's home but she still came by to see her every day. And what had happened to Dan had only driven home the fact that nothing was guaranteed and every moment was precious.

As soon as she moved in with him the rumors about her flew. The villagers, the young women especially, saw her in the worst possible light. She was nothing but a whore out to steal Minato's fortune. She was immoral and shameless, using her body to sneak into his bed. Surprisingly enough though none of their moral outrage was ever directed at Minato. He was their shining hero and nothing he did could be wrong. They seemed to think he was the helpless victim of her feminine wiles. As though he had to be tricked into wanting her to stay with him. She didn't hold it against Minato. It was not his fault the villagers had such a ridiculous double standard. Tsunade approved of their relationship. Kaede and the other servants had accepted her. Minato loved her and wanted her there with him. So far as she was concerned everyone else could go to hell. She loved him and she was staying right where she was.

---

When Minato arrived at the Tower he saw Tsunade slumped over in her chair, her head resting on the table. *She's been out all night drinking again*, he thought. Since returning to the village she'd been doing that more and more often. She'd also started gambling much more heavily. Her gambling had always been a problem, but for someone with a huge family fortune it had been a manageable

problem. From what he'd heard from Kaede (her sources were almost always accurate) auntie had managed to gamble away close to half a million ryu in just a month. If she kept going at that pace even her family fortune wouldn't last more than a couple years. Then what?

But what possibly bothered him the most was her change in attitude towards the Hokage and the village in general. Like Jiraiya she had always held an abiding faith and trust in her old teacher even when they argued. She called him old man as a term of endearment. Now though, word was she was referring to him as, 'old fool' and blaming him for the losses of the war. Her love for the village her grandfather founded was also starting to vanish. She seemed to no longer care about the village she had always loved.

As he approached her he was not sure what to say or do. He had lost people as well (poor Obito) that didn't mean their deaths had been meaningless, or that everything could simply be blamed on Sarutobi. As for Konoha his love for his home had only been strengthened after fighting so hard to protect it. The Will of Fire burned hot inside of him as he was sure it did in most other Leaf nin. If Tsunade's Will of Fire had died out how was he to help her relight it?

"How are you feeling auntie?" He said to her

She lifted her head only just enough to look at him with her blood shot eyes. "I'm hung over and miserable," she muttered. "I wouldn't have come but the old fool insisted." She put her head back down, signaling she did not want to talk to him.

*I'll try again later.* Wearily he approached his own seat.

"Well hello Minato-kun," a voice hissed behind him. "So good to see you again."

Minato turned about to see Orochimaru standing there with a smug smile on his lips. "Hello Orochimaru," he said politely. "What are you



doing at a meeting of the Council?"

"Sarutobi asked me to attend," Orochimaru said pleasantly. "He insisted really. He wouldn't give a reason, but I suspect he has an important announcement to make."

"Really? Do you know what the announcement will be about?"

"No," Orochimaru admitted. "But I can guess, and so can you."

And he could too. *The Hokage has made his choice*, Minato thought with a depressing certainty. *He asked Orochimaru to come here so he could present him to the Council as his chosen successor.*

Orochimaru was obviously thinking along the same lines. "Ku, ku, ku no need to look so worried Minato-kun," Orochimaru's voice dripped sweetness and light. "I told you I won't hold your opposition against you. I have great plans for you." The man tilted his head a bit and gave him a lopsided grin. "You will serve me faithfully won't you?"

"I will always serve the Hokage and the village in any way I am asked."

"Ahhhh, so loyal and dutiful," Orochimaru chuckled. "That's what I so love about you Minato." With that Orochimaru wandered off to talk to some of the other Council members before the meeting began.

Minato took his seat and patiently waited for the Hokage to arrive.

---

They had spent close to two hours discussing tonight's celebration as well as plans for a new tournament to be held between the villages, one that would be used to select Chunin. The meeting was clearly approaching its conclusion and Minato was hoping that both he and Orochimaru had misread the situation.

"There is one final very important issue I would like to discuss with all of you," Sarutobi announced with an unusually solemn tone.

*Oh no*, Minato thought.

"I have had the great honor and privilege of leading this village as Hokage for near thirty years. In that time I have seen our beloved Konoha prosper and grow. I have witnessed new generations being born, growing up, serving, and in some cases dying for this village. I would like to think I have done the best I could for all of you."

From halfway down the table there was a loud snort. All eyes, including Sarutobi's, turned to Tsunade. "Sorry about that," she said innocently.

"In any case," Sarutobi continued in annoyance. "With the war now concluded and peace restored I feel it is time for me to announce my retirement."

Though everyone had known this day was coming the actual announcement struck them like a bomb shell. Up and down the table Council members were squawking and arguing and calling on him to reconsider.

Minato looked to the far end of the table where Orochimaru was. He was leaning forward in his seat, his eyes glistening and a look of eager anticipation painted him. He looked ready to leap up at any moment.

*He certainly wants the job*, Minato thought.

Sarutobi held up a hand and quiet slowly returned to the room. "I thank you all for your concern and well wishes. Never the less my mind is made up. I intend to retire and give up my position as Hokage within the next six months."

"But who will take your place?" One of them asked.

"My successor is sitting right here among you. A great ninja but an even greater man, someone I have come to trust and who I believe has all the traits to be a truly great Hokage." As Sarutobi paused he

looked down the table to his beloved student. He could see Orochimaru shaking with excitement. *Please forgive me my pupil. I wanted it to be you, I really did. But in the end I could not put this village in your hands. As your teacher it would seem I failed to give you the proper lessons. For that I am truly sorry.*

Sarutobi took a deep breath and spoke. "Namikaze Minato," he stated. "You are my choice to succeed me and become the Fourth Hokage. Will you accept this grave responsibility?"

Minato froze like a deer caught in bright light. "Wha... what?"

"Will you accept my nomination and become the Yondaime?"

Minato couldn't speak. He hadn't thought he'd be chosen, he'd resigned himself to serving Orochimaru. He couldn't bring himself to say anything so he just nodded his head dumbly up and down.

Seeing the reaction Sarutobi looked to be slightly amused. *Good, he thought, you understand the responsibility that is being placed on your shoulders and are taking it seriously.* "I shall take your response as a yes. I hereby call on the Council to ratify my choice."

One by one the Council members were called on. And one by one they said yes, even Uchiha Fugaku decided to agree with his Hyuuga rival to make the vote unanimous.

"It is done," Sarutobi said. Relief flooding his voice. "Congratulations Minato."

All the Council members approached him to personally congratulate him.

Tsunade came up and patted his shoulder as if comforting him. "Sorry I got you into this."

Orochimaru came over as well. "Congratulations," he said and quickly turned to go.

"Orochimaru!" Minato called to him urgently.

He turned and sent Minato an annoyed look. "Yes?"

"As you said earlier I won't hold anything against you, I consider you a great ninja. I trust that you will serve me as Hokage just as you did Sarutobi."

A reptilian smile flickered across his lips. "But of course," he promised. "I will serve you just as I serve Sarutobi-sensei." He gave a polite nod and fled the meeting room.

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Word of the decision spread throughout the village like wild fire. It only increased the joy people were already feeling. With the war over and with their great hero in place as their next leader the future seemed full of endless possibilities. The best days were surely ahead.

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That evening the Council members and other VIPs gathered on the roof of the Tower while much of the village was crowded below in the plaza. Their cheers and shouts of joy could be heard even on the Tower roof.

Kushina was dressed in her kimono, her arms wrapped tight around Minato. A few of the people on the roof frowned at her. They obviously would have preferred she not be present. But she was here with Minato so they made the best of it. As the fireworks were about to begin Sarutobi was standing near Minato and Kushina.

"He didn't come," Sarutobi said sadly.

"Who?" Kushina asked.

"Orochimaru," Sarutobi said. "I'd hoped he would be here to celebrate along with the rest of the village. But perhaps that was too much to ask."

"The third Sannin," Kushina said. "You know I still haven't met him."

"You will eventually," Minato said. "Trust me; there is no reason for you to hurry the moment."

Kushina looked at him in surprise. "You don't like him?"

"I respect him and admire not only his ability as a ninja but his keen intelligence. He is a great ninja and deserving of the title of Sannin." Minato said, meaning every word.

"But you don't like him do you?"

Minato did not say anything. The way rumors spread in Konoha it was wise not to say something that might give offense.

The first sky rocket whistled as it rose into the night sky, it burst in a magnificent shower of gold light.

"You know," Sarutobi said. "I have always thought that a Hokage's career is like a fireworks display. A long steady ascent that leads to a final peak and a magnificent and glorious sight... before fading away."

"Hokage-sama," Minato spoke up. "Please don't sound so gloomy. Even if you are retiring you are not going to fade away."

Sarutobi smiled. "Perhaps, but you Minato have begun your ascent, I am sure it will be a good many years before you reach your peak."

---

In a secret lab located in the sewers of Konoha Orochimaru was humming to himself as he readied his tools. For a long time now he had wanted to begin doing serious research into achieving immortality. He had already gained some basic information from the study of animals, but there was only so much he could learn. He had held back until now in order to concentrate on his other dream, becoming Hokage. Once he'd gained supreme power he would be

free to conduct his experiments in private using criminals and enemy prisoners. He would have led Konoha to such glory and power! He could have made his village the center of the greatest empire the world had even known. But he had been betrayed, betrayed by the one man he had admired and trusted most in the world. The man who had been more of a father to him than his real one.

"It's all right; it just means it's time to concentrate on the other dream."

"Please!" The man chained down to the surgical table cried out.  
"Orochimaru-sama what are you doing?"

Orochimaru smiled down at his helpless victim as he picked up a saw. He tried to pretend it was Sarutobi lying there chained and helpless. "I am conducting a little experiment and you are my lab rat. Please feel free to scream as much as you like, I rather enjoy it."

As he began the man did scream, and Orochimaru did enjoy it.

# Lady Tsunade

## Two Months Later

It was well past noon and Tsunade was still lying in bed asleep. She was dressed in her usual green outfit including jacket. Her clothes looked rumpled, but then that was to be expected when you slept in them.

There was a hesitant knock at the door. "Lady Tsunade? Are you awake?" A servant's voice called nervously.

"Ooooooh," Tsunade groaned. There was a tiny little demon hiding somewhere inside her skull pounding away with a sledgehammer. Opening up her bleary eyes they were stung but all the bright light. There was the faint after taste of vomit in her mouth. *O.k. I am never going out drinking all night again.* She promised herself for the hundredth time.

"Lady Tsunade?"

"What?" She barked out and immediately regretted it.

"Ah, pardon me Lady Tsunade, but you have a visitor."

"Is it the old fool?" *I have got to start researching a medical jutsu for hangovers.* She slowly rubbed her temples.

"Uhm, if by that you mean the Lord Hokage then no, it's..."

"I don't care who it is," she said irritably. "I'm not seeing anyone. Tell them to go away."

"But lady Tsunade, I really think you want to..."

"No visitors!" She winced a little at the throbbing in her head.

"Yes Lady Tsunade, I will tell Shizune to go."

"Good," she muttered and put her head beneath the pillow. She had shut her eyes and started to try and drift back to sleep when a ray of light penetrated the fog. "Wait!" She sat up and called out, again wincing.

"Yes Lady Tsunade?"

"Please tell her to wait; I will be down in twenty minutes."

"Yes Lady Tsunade."

Through sheer force of will she pushed herself up onto her feet and stumbled towards the bathroom. She swallowed a handful of aspirin and took a hot shower.

---

When she made it downstairs half an hour later she had recovered enough to look almost life like. When the little twelve year old spotted her she came to attention and gave Tsunade a formal and rigid bow.

"Thank you for meeting with me Lady Tsunade," Shizune said in a polite voice.

The formal reception took Tsunade by surprise. She gave the girl the warmest smile she could manage in her current state. "There's no need to be so polite Shizune-chan. You are always welcome here you know that."

The girl looked down embarrassed. "I wasn't sure. Since... since Uncle Dan died you haven't come to see me once."

That was true Tsunade suddenly realized. When she'd returned she'd gone to see Dan's niece to tell her what had happened and to give her what comfort she could. But since then she'd been too busy dealing with her own sorrow to worry about anyone else.



"I'm sorry Shizune; I've been a little distracted lately." Feeling a little awkward she hurriedly brought up a familiar topic. "How are your classes going?"

The girl looked up with surprise and hurt in her eyes. "Didn't you even notice?" With two fingers she tapped the shiny new hitai-ite.

Seeing that Tsunade's blood shot eyes snapped really open. "Wait! You've graduated the academy? But you couldn't have! It's only been..." Tsunade blinked as she tried to piece together just how much time had passed since Dan's death. *Has it really been months? It couldn't be... but I guess it has.* She felt a deep pang of shame. Dan had loved his niece dearly and Tsunade had always been very fond of her. *Have I really neglected her for months?*

"I graduated two days ago after passing all y tests," Shizune said with a melancholy tone. "I was sort of hoping you would be there to celebrate with me."

Now Tsunade was the one to look down, in shame. Shizune had lost her parents as a little girl. Her uncle had been her only remaining family. Which meant she wouldn't have had anyone there to congratulate her on becoming a ninja and an adult.

"I'm sorry Shizune."

The girl didn't acknowledge the apology. "And today I went back to the academy sure you would be there to take me as your apprentice. But instead I was assigned to one of the three man squads." The girl looked at Tsunade accusingly. "You broke your promise."

Tsunade's head came up. "No! I would never break my promise to you!"

"But you did, my academy sensei told me you never put in a request for me. That if you had they would have accommodated it, anything for one of the Sannin."

Again Tsunade realized that was true. She had never bothered talking to anyone at the academy. That was because she'd been waiting to make sure Shizune passed all her advanced biology classes.

"I never imagined you would break your promise," Shizune continued. "But I guess a lot of things changed when Uncle Dan died." She stepped back and gave Tsunade another formal bow. "But I thank you for all the help and encouragement you gave me before. I still intend to be a medic nin, I'll just have to get there on my own. Goodbye Lady Tsunade."

"Wait a minute! Where do you think you are going?"

"My teammates and I are taking a test tomorrow. If we don't pass it we go back to the academy for remedial training."

"You're not taking any silly test tomorrow," Tsunade said sharply. "And you're not joining a squad either. Starting tomorrow you *will* be my apprentice. And just so you know you should get your travel pack ready. Part of your education will be studying healing methods from across the elemental lands, so we'll be doing a whole lot of traveling. It'll probably do us both some good to get away from Konoha for awhile anyway."

"But... but it's already too late. I've already been assigned to my squad."

"It's never too late as long as you have breath and the will to act!"

Shizune looked at her. "Really?"

Hearing the doubt in the girl's voice hurt more than anything else. "Yes, absolutely," she put her arms around the little girl. "I'm so sorry Shizune, I've neglected you, but from now on I promise that I'll look out for you and be there when you need me."

Shizune put her own arms about Tsunade and hugged her back. "Please don't abandon me," she cried.

Tsunade squeezed her tight. "Never."

---

Sarutobi was looking at the report on his desk. There had been another disappearance yesterday. A 42 year old shop keeper named Izumari had simply vanished while on his way home from his place of business. And just like the other cases there was no trace of him and no witness to what might have happened. He was simply gone. Like the other twenty one who had gone missing over the past two months. Even the Inuzukas and the Yamanakas had been unable to find a single lead.

Sarutobi had all twenty two reports spread out over his desk. He had been nicknamed the, 'Professor' thanks to his sharp mind and analytical skills. Right now he was trying to use that brain of his to spot some pattern in all this. At first glance the victims seemed to have nothing in common. They were men, women, and children of various class and economic backgrounds. (Two of the victims were even ninja.) They had lived throughout the village. Their ages had ranged from 8 to 62. Their occupations had run the gambit from shopkeeper to student to ninja to day laborer. There was just no common thread among any of them beyond the fact they were from Konoha.

The crimes themselves made no rational sense. What was the purpose? Ransom? No demands had been received by any of the families. Even if they had most of the victims had been much too poor for there to be any real chance of a significant ransom. A terror attack? Could an enemy be doing this to foster panic and fear within the village? That would seem like a reasonable explanation except for one thing. Were someone trying to cause a panic they would do all they could to publicize each disappearance. Whoever was behind this was deliberately doing the opposite. So far Sarutobi had managed to keep what was going on from the general public. But that could not possible continue for much longer. Revenge? Could

the disappearances be part of some personal vendetta? The sheer diversity of the victims, not to mention they were nearly all civilians, seemed to rule that out. So what did that leave? What could be the motivation for these crimes? Nothing Sarutobi could see.

But what was most disturbing was the level of skill required to make so many people vanish in a ninja village without a trace. Obviously no ordinary ninja could achieve that. Only someone of elite Jonin status would be capable of it. In the entire village he reckoned there were only nine or ten ninja with the necessary skill. That number included himself, his students, and Minato. He'd ordered that all possible candidates be discreetly investigated for their whereabouts during the times the disappearances occurred. Given missions, training, and public appearances most of the candidates were quickly cleared.

Except for one.

Orochimaru.

Over the last two months his prize pupil's behavior had grown erratic. He had refused every mission offered him. He had begun to withdraw from public life. Except for training Anko he was rarely seen in the village anymore. Nearly all his time was now being spent alone. So what was he doing with all this free time?

*I cannot believe,* thought Sarutobi. *No I refuse to believe that he could have anything to do with this.* It made no sense. What possible motivation could there be for a man of Orochimaru's status to do this? If he was not beloved as Minato was or as well liked as Jiraiya or Tsunade, he was still greatly respected and admired. Even if his character excluded him from the position of Hokage there were certainly still places for a ruthless ninja to serve. Sarutobi had been thinking of giving him charge of ANBU's Torture and Interrogation Section.

He looked back down at the reports. Twenty two of his people had gone missing and were likely dead. And whether he liked it or not his

student was the only logical suspect. *Whatever my personal feelings I must carry out my duty as Hokage.* He would order both the ANBU and Military Police to circumspectly begin investigating Orochimaru. With any luck they would prove his innocence.

"Hey you can't go in there!" A man's voice shouted from the reception area. Without further warning his office door opened and then slammed shut.

"I need to talk to you, you old fool." Tsunade told him.

Sarutobi swiftly closed up all the reports and stuffed them into one of his drawers. "What is the meaning of this Tsunade?" He said sharply. Student or not he was reaching the limits of his patience with her. She was not the only one to have suffered a loss in the war. Like anyone else in that situation she had been given leave to mourn in her own way. But it had been months now and not only had she not healed her behavior was getting worse. Drinking, gambling, causing bar fights, ignoring her duties... the whole village was starting to notice. And he didn't care much for her *personal* attacks on him.

"I need a couple favors," she told him. Her tone of voice was anything but apologetic.

"If you want favors from me Tsunade there are better ways to go about asking for them then barging into my office and insulting me."

She frowned and crossed her arms. "Sorry," she muttered quickly and half heartedly. "But this is important."

He sighed; he didn't think he would get any greater repentance from her. "What is it you need?"

"First I need Shizune to be assigned to me as my apprentice."

"Shizune?" The name was just vaguely familiar. "Is she one of the new academy graduates?"

"That's right, and she was Dan's niece. I promised to take her as an apprentice and make her a medic nin. She's already been assigned to one of the rookie squads so I need her officially reassigned to me."

Sarutobi looked at her with mounting annoyance. "And why did you not put in this request weeks ago?"

"It slipped my mind."

*In other words you were too busy drinking and gambling to be concerned with your apprentice.* "And what about this girl's squad mates and sensei? Have you given any thought as to how this will affect them?"

"Not really," she answered bluntly. "I'm sorry of some people are *inconvenienced* by this. But getting Shizune is important to me."

"And you don't really care who else suffers so long as you get what you want?"

Tsunade sent him a sharp look that should have peeled the skin from his flesh. "Aren't those *your* sentiments Lord Hokage? You won your damn war, what did the cost matter?"

He shut his eyes wearily. He didn't want to have this same argument with her again. "I regret every sacrifice that was made, but they were necessary."

"If you were truly sorry you wouldn't have started the war."

"Suna invaded our territory while Iwa attacked our allies. There was no choice but to fight."

"You could have found some other way!" Tsunade insisted hotly.

"Certainly, I could have surrendered unconditionally. That would have avoided the war. Though I doubt you or anyone else would have thanked me."

She just stood there glaring at him.

*Deep down she knows I did what I had to. But she needs someone to blame.* "I will figure something out; Shizune will be your apprentice."

"Thank you," she muttered. "Now I also want permission for me and Shizune to leave the village indefinitely and travel as we please."

"What?!" Sarutobi was caught totally off guard. "What are you talking about? What about your duties here, both on the Council and as head of the hospital?"

"The hospital will be just fine," she promised. "I trained the staff myself and they are the best in the world. The people of Konoha won't suffer because I'm gone. As for my Council seat who cares? I trust the *next* Hokage. Konoha will be fine without me."

"But why do you wish to leave? This village is your home. Your grandfather founded this village."

"I know all that, but I can't stand it here any longer. Everything I see just reminds me of Dan and Nawaki and how their lives were cut short for the sake of this damn place. I can't bear to live here anymore. If I leave then maybe in time my heart will heal and I'll be able to care for this place again. But if I stay things will only fester."

"I see," he said quietly. He had never imagined things had gotten this bad. If those were her honest feelings then it probably was best if she left for awhile. "How long do you think you will be away?"

"Honestly I have no idea, weeks, months, years, who knows?"

"Very well Tsunade, I will grant you and your student special status. I hope I will see you returning to us before too long."

She nodded appreciatively. "Thanks old man."

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## The Following Morning at the Gate

Kushina was hugging her desperately. "I can't believe you're really leaving! I should have spent more time with you! I'm sorry!"

"Don't be ridiculous, you spent plenty of time with me, you're a good friend. And you still have the man you love alive and well. You *should* be spending all the time with him you can." She released her hug with a smile. "Take care of yourself Kushina."

"You too, and lets meet again soon."

"Is there anything I can say or do to change your mind auntie?" Minato asked.

"Sure! Promise to never to call me auntie ever again."

"Done!"

That got a laugh out of her. "Oh kami if I'd only known that was all it would take!" She put her arms around him and gave him a long hug. "I expect you to be one hell of a great Hokage. Don't disappoint or I'll come back here to put you in a corner."

"You know you're giving me motivation to screw up deliberately."

Smiling she let go of him and held out a hand. "Minato can I have one of your tri-kunai?"

"Well sure," he handed over one of his special marked weapons.

"Now this means you can reach me no matter where I am right?" He nodded. "So that means you have no excuse," she eyed both him and Kushina. "I expect to get an invitation to your wedding."

The two of them blushed.

"Oh Tsunade!" Jiraiya had tears running down his face as he ran up to her with both arms extended.



Smack.

He came to a halt as his face ran into Tsunade's out stretched palm.  
"What the hell do you think you're doing pervert?"

"I was trying to get a hug."

Tsunade snorted. "Like I'd hug you, you'd just try to cop a feel. And knock off the fake tears it's embarrassing."

"My tears aren't fake!" He howled. "How can you be so cruel Tsunade-hime? To just deliberately leave us like this and deny us your gifts!"

"Don't give me that!" She shot back. "I've trained up all the medic nin in this village. The medical care of Konoha is now second to none in the entire world. No one will suffer just because I'm not here to practice my medical jutsus."

"Who the hell cares about medical jutsus?!!" Jiraiya roared furiously and pointed accusingly at Tsunade's chest. "How are the men of this village supposed to go on without having your magnificent breast to look upon?!"

Wham!

Wham!

Wham!

"Uh auntie," Minato spoke as Tsunade stood over a prostate Jiraiya beating him beyond senseless. "If you out sensei in the hospital again I don't think the Hokage will let you leave the village."

Though furious this did bring her attack to a halt. "I guess I should go before I end up killing him. Let's go Shizune, the world awaits."

"All right!" Shizune called eagerly.

And together they were soon gone from sight.

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### **One Week Later**

Minato and Kushina were in their favorite spot, on their little bench in the rose garden. They were kissing and holding each other close amid the sweet fragrance of the roses.

"Pardon me," Kaede's calm voice interrupted them.

"Yah!" Minato jumped to his feet and dumped Kushina on the ground.

"Would you stop doing that?" an annoyed Kushina asked as she came to her feet and cleaned herself off.

"I'm sorry dear," he said apologetically before turning to a calm Kaede. "What is it?"

"I apologize for the interruption," Kaede said smoothly. "However we have just received a message and it is marked urgent.

"Let me see it," Minato held out his hand.

"Actually, it is for Kushina." Kaede handed it to her.

"For me?" She said nervously. Taking the dispatch she saw it was from Whirlpool. She tore it open and swiftly read it. It was a short message.

"Anything wrong?" Minato asked.

"You might say that," she said in a dead tone. "It's a recall, I'm to return home."

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**Spoiler... Spoiler... Spoiler...**

The following involves the recent Naruto manga. Anyone who doesn't want to know about it should read no further.

**Author's Note:** This may only be my opinion but... Hinata is NOT dead. At the very least I refuse to believe it until I SEE A BODY. I accept that Kakashi is dead because both Tsunade and Naruto indicate it, AND there was a scene where he was speaking to his father and promising to tell him all about his life. That seems like a lot of evidence. Shizune by contrast only appears dead on a couple panels BUT Inoichi comments that she is dead and the other Leaf nins do not dispute it. Now so far we have NOT seen Hinata's body which was DELIBERATELY hidden from view. There is blood, but so what? That could just as easily be from a non lethal wound. And so far the only person who says Hinata is dead is Pein, hardly a credible source. Pein is currently trying to make a point to Naruto about peace and people understanding each other. Having just heard Hinata confess her love to Naruto and offer to die fighting for him would it be surprising if he hadn't killed Hinata and just said so because he was trying to make some point to Naruto? So until I see a body and hear Naruto or Tsunade or Sakura or some other known leaf nin say she is dead I don't believe it. As a matter of fact the entire set up leads me to believe she will be seriously hurt and somehow saved by Naruto.

Also if it turns out I'm wrong and she really did die immediately after FINALLY confessing her feelings then I think I'm done with the manga and the anime. Essentially the entire reason for Hinata's existence is to be an example of pure and honest devotion and to be Naruto's reward for all his years of struggle and keeping faith. The reason I love the Naru Hina pairing is because they both deserve to be with each other. She because of her faithfulness to the one she loves. He because he never gave up despite everything he was forced to endure, Naruto has EARNED having someone honestly and faithfully love him. To have his love taken away the moment after he learns how she feels is not only senseless but out right cruel. I honestly don't think the deaths of Kakashi or Shizune were needed. Unlike the deaths of Asuma and Jiraiya they seem pointless.

Shizune's death in particular seemed utterly irrelevant. When a major character is killed it should be for a reason. As with the deaths of Minato, Haku, Sarutobi, Itachi, etc. while sad all at least have meaning. For Hinata to have loved him all this time, confessed, and then simply died would make everything she went through POINTLESS.

## A shadowy figure

It was early the next morning at the gate. Two lovers were saying their goodbyes.

"I can't believe you're really going," Minato said quietly.

Kushina was trying very hard not to burst into tears in front of him. She had never ever imagined that going home could make her heart ache like this. "Well you know technically my mission was over as soon as the Hokage and I signed the alliance treaty. And then the war pretty much ended before we could send an army to help you fight anyway. So really this whole time I've been with you was an unexpected bonus. I mean, not to brag, but I am an elite Jonin. I don't think my village could really just forget about me permanently." She managed a naughty grin. "Besides, my dad probably heard how you were taking advantage of his daughter."

Minato looked a little worried. "You don't think..."

She laughed. "Minato-kun honey you still don't really understand the Uzumaki. If my dad actually thought that he'd show up with half the clan after having declared a vendetta."

"You really know how to set my mind at ease," he said dryly.

Smiling she got up on her toes and gave him another kiss on those soft lips. "Kami, I'm going to miss you Minato-kun honey."

"I don't want you to go," he said pleadingly.

"Well I don't want to go either. But I'm a ninja, if I don't return I'd have to go through that whole missing nin thing. I'd like to avoid that if I could." She leaned against him and rested her head against his chest. "I promise to get another mission to Konoha as soon as I can, though that might be months." She looked up at him hopefully.

"Hokages are allowed to travel right?"

He nodded immediately. "I can go on a state visit, but..." he looked disappointed. "I couldn't stay longer than a few days and Hokages are expected to remain in the village most of the time."

The two of them both looked unhappy. What they both understood but avoided saying out loud was that it was going to be very hard for them to be together again for more than a few days.

"Well you could always marry me and then I could stay with you forever." Kushina said in a light voice.

Minato looked at her with a solemn expression.

"Just kidding!" She said quickly. "That was just a little joke!"

"Kushina," he said in a voice heavier than led. "I would love to have you be my wife. But there are... difficulties."

She looked away to try and hide the sudden hurt she felt. "I... I know that. I mean you are the Yellow Flash of Konoha, a living legend and soon to be leader of the most powerful ninja village in the whole world. Why would you want a... a girl from a third rate village when you can have anyone?"

"Kushina..."

"I'll be your mistress if you want," she said suddenly. "If that's the only way for me to be with you I don't mind! I love you so much Minato-kun honey! I just want to be with you any way I can!"

"I love you too Kushina, more than I have ever loved anyone!" He wrapped his arms tight around her. "I love you so much I can't even imagine being without you!"

She didn't say anything else, she was happy just being in his arms, knowing he loved her.

But ultimately she still had to go. They shared a last lingering kiss and she fled as fast and hard as she could without daring to look

back. She was afraid that if she looked back she would lose all will to leave.

*Baka! She cursed herself. Baka! Baka! Baka! 'You could always marry me.' What the hell was I thinking saying that to him?! He's going to be freaking Hokage! No way could he ever marry someone like me! Our time together was a beautiful dream and I will always treasure it, but it can never be anything more than that.*

Since there was no one there to see it she let herself cry.

---

Minato returned home depressed and unsure what to do next.

"Kushina has left for home Minato-sama?" Kaede came up to him.

"Yeah," he didn't have the energy for a longer answer.

"Why did you not ask her to stay?"

"She is a ninja with a recall order, I couldn't ask her to just ignore that. Especially not for my own selfish reasons."

"I am sure if you had asked her to marry you something could have been arranged."

Minato's head snapped around and he stared at the calm and ever cool Kaede.

"Did I say something wrong Minato-sama?"

"You know I can't marry her," Minato said.

"Why not Minato-sama? Are you afraid she would say no? Or do you think her father would be opposed to a blood tie to the Namikaze clan head and Fourth Hokage of Konoha?"

"As Hokage my duty is to act in the best interest of the village. I have already received offers from clans in Suna, Kiri, and Kumo with

promises of alliance from the village leaders if I marry any of them. If I do take a foreign bride as Hokage it should be someone from one of the major villages."

"For the good of Konoha?"

"That's right."

She gave him a speculative look that he was very familiar with. It was one she always gave him when she thought he was being an idiot.

"What? Isn't the Hokage supposed to do what is best for the village?"

"Certainly," Kaede agreed. "However the last that I checked even a Hokage is allowed to fall in love." She bowed to him and went about on her way.

*She always does that, Minato thought fondly. Tells me I'm an idiot without saying I'm an idiot.*

---

Kakashi was examination room 2 waiting for the standard exam. Sensei had spoken to a couple people and his request to go into the ANBU had been approved. He hadn't told anyone yet, but he was planning on asking for assignment in the Black Ops. Many of the Black Ops ANBU went on solo missions. He thought that would be best. After what had happened he never wanted to lose a teammate again. All he needed to do was take this standard check up, fill out a few forms, and then pass the ANBU exam. Piece of cake.

The door to the examination room opened and the medic nin who was scheduled walked in.

"Hi Kakashi, it's been awhile."

"RIN?! What are you doing here?"



"Oh didn't I tell you?" Rin said innocently. "I've been reassigned to the Hospital for now."

"You never mentioned that," Kakashi said accusingly.

"Well maybe if you would actually talk to me for more than thirty seconds when I track you down I would have."

"You know I just realized, I left a cake in the oven," he began to perform a shun shin.

"If you leave I'm going to say you failed your check up because you had a social disease."

Beneath his mask he gaped at her. "You wouldn't!"

"Try me." She had an evil gleam in her eye that Kakashi had never seen before. It scared him.

He dropped his hands to his sides. "What changed? You used to be so sweet and innocent. When did you suddenly get so manipulative?"

"It happens when a girl gets ignored. Now then," she had a sudden wicked smile to match the wicked look in her eyes. "Please drop your pants."

Gulp.

---

Minato was walking along the street trying to relax and get his mind off Kushina.

Everywhere he went people waved to him and called out friendly greetings. People in Konoha admired him. He enjoyed the admiration of the villagers and his fellow nin, though it often made him feel unworthy. They thought so highly of him. He didn't want to do anything that would disappoint them or lower their opinion of him.

"Minato-kun!"

Before he could dodge. Glomp! He had a beautiful big chested blonde on his back.

"Ready for our first date darling?" The girl cooed in his ear.

He let out a weary sigh. "Hello Dita, could you please climb off my back?"

"Why?" She giggled and began to deliberately rub her chest against him. "Doesn't this feel niiaaice?"

"Please climb down Dita," his patience was already straining. This sudden attack only reminded him of just why he cared so much for Kushina.

With a girlish frown she let go of him and dropped to the street. "You know Minato-kun most men would be thrilled to have me do that."

He nodded. "I'm sure Inoichi would."

Dita's frown deepened and she crossed her arms beneath her ample bosom. "What are you bringing my cousin up for?"

"I thought you two were dating... again."

"We broke up... again."

"You should marry him," Minato said seriously. "He really loves you."

"Wha... what are you saying that for?"

"Because real love is a very special and precious thing Dita," Minato said. "Too precious to keep throwing away."

"Then that means you should go out with me! I love you Minato-kun!"

He shook his head wearily. "No you don't, ever since the academy you and the other girls have never seen me as a person, just as some ideal. How can you ever see the real me when you all have stars in your eyes?"

"What are you talking about? I know you better than anyone!"

"What's my favorite food?"

She gawked at him. "Uhm... steak?"

He shook his head. "Dita I really..." he stopped and his head jerked up and to the right. *Killer intent!* It was just the tiniest sliver of it, only a ninja with his level of detection skills would have noticed it. His ability to detect such threats had saved his life on the battlefield many times.

And it saved him now.

He looked up just in time to see a shadowy figure on a roof top. Minato acted on pure instinct. With one hand he grabbed Dita's arm before they both vanished in a yellow flash. Six kunai, all with explosive tags attached, flew into the space Minato had occupied just a second earlier. As one they went off with a massive explosion. People who had simply been walking along the street were killed instantly. Many more were down and screaming with injuries.

---

The ninja with a black mask over his face and a tattered cloak was leaping across rooftops trying to put as much space as he could between himself and where the failed attack had gone. He'd only crossed five blocks when a ferocious kick into the small of his back sent him down hard on a roof top. Before he could even think of getting up or reaching for a weapon there was a kunai at his throat.

"I don't know who you are," Minato said coldly. "But you have two choices; surrender or die."

The other ninja grinned. "Third choice, lets die together."

Minato felt his chakra flowing out of his body and into the explosive notes on his chest. *Crap!* Once again his detection abilities saved him. He disappeared in a flash of yellow as a massive explosion took out the top two floors of the building they were on.

---

Sarutobi and Minato were at the scene along with several ANBU investigators hours later.

"Fifteen dead and thirty seven wounded, all civilians." Sarutobi said quietly.

"All just to try and kill me," Minato said furiously. "This was an act of war!"

"True," Sarutobi said sadly. "But we will never know by whom. There is almost no physical evidence left of the perpetrator. We will never know who he was or who hired him."

"He had to be from Iwa," Minato said.

"There is no proof of that, and I fear you have many enemies throughout the elemental lands."

Minato was forced to nod with a grimace. He had made a lot of enemies over the years. Just because the rock nins hated him most didn't mean they were the only ones who wanted him dead. "I'm always going to be a target aren't I?"

"Yes, I am afraid you will," Sarutobi said, not trying to sugarcoat it. "But you and your future family will always be well protected."

*My future family.* That was right, he wouldn't be the only one targeted. In the ninja world family members could also be targets for revenge.

That was something he was really going to have to think about.

## Even if it must be in secret

**Author's Note:** This story will end with the first day of Naruto being at the academy. The events that occur after Naruto's birth are all part of the same timeline as, 'A Mother's Love.' However they will not be part of, 'Fire and Blood' where a temporary coma is the altering event. Among other things this story will show how Kushina became known as the, 'Red Death' and explain why Kaede is not seen in AML.

---

### Three Months Later

Uzumaki Naoko had only just returned home when his beautiful daughter approached him with a warm smile. "Father, have I mentioned how handsome you look today?"

Naoko sent her a weary glance. "There aren't any missions to Konoha. Haven't I told you that if one comes available I'll send you?"

Kushina's smile slowly flattened out. "Not even a courier mission?" She asked hopefully. Such missions were very low C-ranks and a complete waste for someone with her skills. She didn't care.

"When I said there were no missions that's what I meant." Naoko sounded a bit annoyed. "Honestly Kushina, when will you stop obsessing over him? It's getting to be a bit embarrassing how shameless you are about wanting to see him again."

A little red colored her face. Her father was a proud man, and she knew her behavior had to be uncomfortable for him. She was essentially pleading for the chance to see Minato again just so they could have a day or two together. "I'm sorry father, it's just, I can't really feel any shame when I think about him."

Naoko nodded. There was nothing quite like a young maiden in love. *Though of course most of the great tragedies usually center on one.* "If a mission comes up I promise to let you know."

Kushina nodded and headed to her room.

---

"Hey kid!" Jiraiya boomed. "How about you take your old sensei out to have a drink or two or ten?"

Minato looked up from the Hokage's desk. "Hey sensei, did you just get back?"

"Yeah, just now." He shut the door to the Hokage's office and came in. Minato was in his usual trench coat and had his Jonin jacket on. But otherwise he was behaving just like the Hokage. He was seated behind Sarutobi's desk signing orders and stamping them with the Third's seal. "Did I miss something? I thought the inauguration wasn't for another couple of weeks."

Minato grinned wearily. "I think I got tricked. Sarutobi said he wanted to give me a little on the job training to help ready me for when I take over. But as soon as he got me behind the desk he vanished. I think he let all his paperwork pile on purpose too."

Jiraiya chuckled. "What do you want to bet he's somewhere painting a hill or a forest or something?"

"It wouldn't surprise me," Minato muttered as he stamped a requisition order and moved it to the, 'out' box.

"Well get used to it kid, in a couple weeks you'll be the real thing, not a stand in."

"Wonderful," Minato sighed.

Jiraiya looked at his protégé. "What? I know paper work is the bane of all Hokage's but even so you have to be just a little excited right?"

Minato looked at his teacher with a serious expression. "I don't think I'll be able to leave the village for at least a year. The Council is absolutely adamant that the Hokage can't be going on missions himself. Any trips I make have to be official state visits, and I'll need to wait at least year before Ai can go on one to really establish myself as the new leader of Konoha."

"You wanting to go somewhere in particular kid?"

"Uzu," he said quietly.

"Oh, ho!" Jiraiya laughed. "And are you wanting to get some fresh calamari or is there something else you're hungry for?"

"It's not like that," Minato said annoyed. "I really miss her. Haven't you ever missed someone so much you couldn't stop thinking about her?"

"Nope!" He said proudly. "When you're the one and only legendary toad sage the women fall for you like sakura blossoms in a windstorm! One is pretty much like any other to me."

"Even Tsunade?"

For just a second Minato saw his teacher drop the mask and he saw a look of despair and longing. But it was gone as quick as it had come and he was laughing. "Tsunade? That stuck up angry princess? As if I'd ever miss her."

Minato knew better than to try and confront him on what he really felt. "Well I miss Kushina. More and more, it's only been three months but I can't stand not seeing her. The idea I might not see her for a whole year is driving me insane." He sighed. "But even if I can visit her or she can come here to visit me it'll only be for a short time. I want her to come here and stay."

"Fine, why don't you marry her then?"



"I've thought about it," he told his teacher. That made Jiraiya do a double take. "But if I did marry her she'd be in constant danger. She'd be a target."

"O.k., if you really want her that badly just invite her to come and live with you. I mean how many women would turn down the chance to live in the Namikaze mansion and be the Hokage's main squeeze?"

"I don't want that," Minato said seriously. "She deserves better than to just be a kept woman! I love her and I really want her to be with me forever. I just wish there was some way to do that without putting her in greater danger." In the ninja world it was a hard fact that wives, children, and other relations to important people were always targets. Whereas it was generally accepted that lovers and bastard children were unworthy marks.

"Well then why don't you just marry her in secret and have her just pretend to be your woman?"

Minato looked at him. "I wonder if she would agree to that," he said half to himself.

The faraway look in Minato's eyes set alarm bells ringing in Jiraiya's skull. "I was just joking kid."

Minato didn't answer. He looked as though he was giving something some serious thought.

Jiraiya was not liking the serious look on his face. *I have a bad feeling about this.*

---

The next day Minato met with the Hokage.

"There's something I need to do before I take your place." Minato said. "I'd like to be given several day to go somewhere with sensei, no questions asked."

The last part caused Sarutobi to show immediate concern. "You're not planning on doing something foolish are you?"

Minato grinned and rubbed the back of his head. "Whether it's foolish or not depends on who you ask. Sensei thinks I'm crazy, I happen to think it's the only thing that makes sense. But in any case it's not anything that is life threatening."

Sarutobi frowned. "You're to be inaugurated in just two weeks, now is not the time for you to disappear."

"Now is the only time," Minato argued. "If I do that after I become the Fourth it'll cause a panic."

"Is there some reason why you can't tell me what this is about?"

"If I tell you it is an S-rank secret," Minato said.

"Very well."

"I'm going to see Kushina and ask her to marry me."

"I see," Sarutobi replied with great seriousness. "Well I can understand why you would want to keep this secret." The old Hokage nodded. "By all means go Minato, if she is this precious to you then by all means go and bring back your bride."

That afternoon Minato and Jiraiya left Konoha.

---

Kushina was summoned to her father's study.

"You wanted to see me father?"

Naoko looked at her and grinned. "I just received a message from Konoha; it seems someone very important will be arriving tomorrow."

Kushina could feel her heart swell and pound inside of her. "You mean..."

"That's right! Jiraiya is coming." He saw his daughter's look of confusion and disappointment, with a laugh he added. "Oh and Minato's coming with him."

"Really? You're not joking are you?" He shook his head. "Yatah!" She shouted and pumped a fist in the air.

---

The next day Kushina and her father waited at the east gate for their honored guests to arrive.

When Minato and Jiraiya neared Whirlpool the older ninja turned to his student. "It's still not too late kid, let's go to Waterfall instead. I know these blonde triplets who will make you forget all about marriage."

Minato frowned at him. "That's not funny Jiraiya-sensei."

"Who's joking?"

Ignoring him Minato hurried on to the gate.

"Minato-kun honey!" Kushina shouted.

"Kushina-chan!" Minato called as they ran into each other's arms. They were soon in the middle of a long and passionate series of kisses.

Naoko looked on feeling rather embarrassed.

Jiraiya looked on as though seeing a casualty on the field; his poor student had been defeated and was soon to become a willing prisoner. *Poor bastard.*

When they finally came up for air Minato nodded to Naoko. "Hello again Naoko-san, if you don't mind I need to talk to your daughter alone for a few minutes."

The two of them disappeared in a flash of yellow.

---

When they reappeared they were on the roof of a building in Whirlpool. Kushina looked at him with a naughty grin on her lips. "Well now Minato-kun honey, what was so important you couldn't wait to get me alone?"

Minato took her desperately into his arms. "Will you marry me?"

She felt her heart stop and her knees get suddenly weak. "Wha... what?"

"Will you marry me?" He repeated again in all seriousness. "Something has become very clear to me since you left. That's how important you really are to me. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. I've missed you terribly Kushina, your laugh, your smile and the way you call me, 'honey.' I want you to be with me, always. I love you, so please marry me."

She had dreamed about this. About his coming here and confessing his love to her. Hearing her darling confess how much he needed her filled her with such raw joy! She needed him too; she hadn't stopped thinking about him either. Her instinct was to shout out, 'yes' at the top of her lungs. But she managed to hold back. "Minato-kun honey I love you too and I would love to be your wife, but... but only if I am your only wife. I... I don't want to share you. If you'll agree to that condition then my answer is a hundred percent yes."

He nodded. "You'll be my only one. But," he'd gotten that one word in just before she could shout out her acceptance. "I'm afraid I have a condition too."

"What is it?" She asked nervously.

"I want to marry you and have a family with you Kushina. But I want to keep our marriage secret for the time being."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean I want to marry you, but when we return to Konoha we won't announce the fact we're married that will have to remain secret."

"But why? Are you... are you ashamed of me?"

"What? No, never! I think you're amazing and the most wonderful woman in the world. I want to shout it from the top of Hokage monument that you're mine!"

"Then why do you want to keep it a secret?" She demanded angrily and shoved him back, pulling herself out of his grasp. "You ask me to marry you and in the next breath you tell me you want it to be your own dirty little secret?!"

"It's not like that!" Minato insisted. "It's to protect you and our children!"

"Protect me? I'm an ANBU captain! Why do I need protection?" She demanded.

"I don't want you to be in extra danger because of me! And what about our children?" He quickly told her of the assassination attempt that had taken place shortly after she left. "As my wife you'll be a target, as will any child you give me. I want you to protect you and our children as much as I can. It won't be for always... but for a few years, until I am satisfied that I really can keep you safe."

She looked at him. He *wasn't* ashamed of her; he was just trying to protect her. She didn't like this condition at all. She was confident enough in her abilities to not have any fears about kidnappings or assassination attempts. What sort of ninja would be afraid of that? She knew what people would think once she began living with him again. She knew how they would look at her and the sorts of things they would call her.

But it didn't matter. She loved him with all of her heart. To be with him she was ready to give up *everything* . Everything she was or ever

could be. She would gladly sacrifice her pride if it meant she could be his.

"Just so we're clear I don't like it," she told him. "But if it's the only way then I'll accept. I'll marry you."

---

The man across from her smiled and laid his cards down. "Jack high straight," he said.

"Augh!" Tsunade tossed her cards down in disgust.

Her opponent scooped up the pot as Tsunade looked at the handful of chips she had left.

"You know auntie, you really are going to go broke one day if you don't stop gambling."

Tsunade turned in her seat to see Minato standing behind her grinning. "Minato! What are you doing here in Forest country? Shouldn't you be in Konoha getting ready for the coronation?"

"Well there's another ceremony I needed to take care of first, one you asked me to invite you to."

She looked at him in confusion, thinking it was some kind of pre-coronation business. "What ceremony?"

Still smiling he leaned in close to whisper to her. "It's a marriage ceremony."

She gasped. "You and Kushina?" She asked excitedly. He nodded. "When is it and where?"

"It's in half an hour and it'll be in her home."

Tsunade blinked, caught off guard for a second time. "It's in half an hour? And it's in Whirlpool?"

"That's right," Minato said. "Where's Shizune?"

"She's attending some seminars at the local medical university. She'll be there until evening."

"Perfect," Minato said. "You can come to the wedding and reception and I can bring you back without her ever knowing you were gone."

"Wait a second! Let me go get her, she'll want to be there too!"

To her surprise though Minato shook his head. "I'm sorry but she can't come and you can't tell her about it. My wedding is going to be a secret."

"A secret?"

"Come on, I'll explain once we're there."

Tsunade insisted on cashing out her few remaining chips. Then the two of them left in a flash of yellow.

---

The need for speed and secrecy meant there could be no formal arrangements. Some of the Uzumaki women went out into the nearby fields and gathered up some flowers. Kushina was able to fit into her mother's pure white wedding kimono. The Uzumaki estate was locked down and the clan gathered in the main house where Uzumaki Naoko personally performed the ceremony. Though the preparations were rushed the ceremony itself was traditional and dignified.

---

Naoko took out a small cup and carefully filled it with ceremonial sake.

"Share in this drink as the two of you will share in all of life's joys and hardships." He intoned.

He handed the cup to Minato who took a small sip. Minato then passed it to Kushina who also sipped from it.

"Have you come here to devote yourselves to one another of your own free will?" Noako questioned, his eyes very intent on Minato.

"Yes," Minato answered solemnly.

"Hai," Kushina said.

"Can any here give just cause why these two should not be joined in sacred marriage?" Naoko called out.

Jiraiya opened his mouth but Tsunade gave him a look *daring* him to say something. He remained silent.

Satisfied Naoko returned his attention to the two of them. "Do you understand that the vows you make this day are spoken before Kami and before all those who have come here to bear witness?"

"Yes," Minato said.

"Yes," Kushina said.

"Then speak the vows, and speak only the truth."

Smiling Minato took a gold ring and carefully slid it on to Kushina's left hand as he spoke.

"My wife, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."

With her hands trembling slightly Kushina took the other wedding band and placed it on Minato's left hand.

"My husband, in sickness and in health I promise that I will love you, respect you, console you, be faithful to you, and protect you. From this day on until the day of my death, this I do swear."



Naoko held his hand up. "May Kami grant you the blessings of health, happiness, and children. May your union be long and lasting. I declare that you are now husband and wife." He smiled and nodded to Minato. "You may kiss your bride."

Minato was only too happy to do so.

"May I present to you," the priest called out. "Namikaze Minato and his bride, Namikaze Kushina."

As the people began to applaud and cheer the young couple broke their kiss and looked into each other's eyes.

"I love you." Minato whispered to her.

"And I love you." Kushina answered.

---

Following the wedding there was a small reception. Giving into his pestering Tsunade agreed to have *one* dance with Jiraiya.

"Enjoy it pervert," Tsunade told him. "This will never happen again."

"What? Not even at our wedding?" Jiraiya teased.

Tsunade snorted. "I should live so long!"

During the reception Naoko had his new son in law and his daughter sign two a pairs of the marriage certificate. (In the rush he had forgotten them.) One would return with Minato to Konoha. The other would be sealed and lodged in the hall of records here.

As they sat down to the wedding feast Minato leaned over to his new bride. "You're my wife," he whispered to her. Sounding as though he could hardly believe it.

Smiling at him she nodded and whispered. "I am your wife." She gently kissed him. *Even if it must be in secret.*

## A too short assent

*"You know," Sarutobi said. "I have always thought that a Hokage's career is like a fireworks display. A long steady assent that leads to a final peak and a magnificent and glorious sight... before fading away."*

---

When Minato and Jiraiya returned with Kushina the news quickly spread through the village. When she was installed in his home the rumors spread like wildfire. It was a bit of a scandal and a few people seriously questioned if they should support a Hokage who would be so immoral as to have a foreign lover openly sharing his bed. But the vast majority chose to accept it and cast a blind eye as much as possible. Minato was their hero and the very best of them. If he had a vice or two, the villagers and ninja were ready to just pretend otherwise.

---

"I entrust this to you Sarutobi," Minato said as he handed the Third Hokage a copy of his marriage certificate. "If anything should ever happen to me I want everyone to know Kushina is my wife and any children we have are heirs and part of my clan."

Sarutobi took the document and nodded. "I promise you Minato I will keep this safe and present it should the time ever come."

Minato was relieved to hear that. Other than Jiraiya there was no one else he trusted more than the Third.

---

"Ack! This is mine?" Kushina sounded disbelieving. She was holding an absolutely stunning diamond necklace that had to be worth a fortune. On top of that there were other rings, bracelets, pendants, and other pieces that all looked to be of the highest quality. But the necklace was easily the masterpiece. "Minato-kun honey this is

probably worth more than everything my clan owns! I can't accept this."

He merely smiled at her. "What are you talking about? These all belonged to my mother. As my wife they're yours now."

She looked at him nervously. "Are you sure?" She felt a little awkward suddenly being given such expensive gifts.

He laughed a bit. "Well I'm not wearing them so you may as well. Now come on there are some things I want to show you."

She returned the necklace to its jewelry box and locked it back up. Minato had shown her where the safe was and entrusted her with the combination. They were hers to do with as she pleased. Once they were locked away he took her over to a bookcase. Minato reached out and pressed a concealed latch. There was a slight; 'click' and the bookcase swung open a few inches revealing a hidden passageway.

"There are hidden passageways all through the mansion," Minato explained. "You can get almost anywhere you want unseen. Other than me the only other person who knows about them is Kaede. Come on let me show them to you." He had an excited child like grin on his face. She could tell he was really enjoying the chance to show these things to her.

She followed him and let him show her the secrets of her new home.

---

When Mai arrived for their lunch date the pink haired kunoichi was surprised to see Dita already sitting there with a bottle of sake half gone.

"It's a little early for this isn't it milk cow?"

Dita looked up at her and poured a drink for her friend / rival. "Shut up and join me brat. Here let's have a toast."

Mai sat down and took the small glass. "What are we toasting?"

Dita held up her glass. "We're toasting you, me, and all the women of Konoha; the losers." She said with a bitter laugh. She clinked her glass to Mai's and downed hers in one go.

Mai took a sip and eyed her blonde companion as she filled up again. "Why are we losers?"

That produced another harsh laugh. "Because all of us lost out to that red headed bitch from wherever the hell she's from."

"Whirlpool," Mai supplied. "Kushina is from Whirlpool." The instant she'd heard, 'red headed bitch' Mai had known exactly who they were talking about. Feeling suddenly depressed she took a large swallow.

Dita nodded her head. "Yeah, with every girl in Konoha to pick from Minato-kun picked *her*." Dita put her glass down, suddenly feeling very weary. "Why?" She said much louder than she needed to. "What is so great about her anyway? What does she have that none of us do?"

Mai shrugged. "Maybe it's *because* she's not from Konoha. Maybe he just found her exotic and interesting." Mai finished her glass and refilled it. "It's o.k. though; he'll get bored with her eventually."

"Ha! I wish! He went out and *brought her home* with him! And now she's sharing his bed every night! He went to her village to bring her back, and I couldn't even get him to have one lousy date with me." She let out a long defeated sigh. "Face it it's over, we lost."

Mai looked very surprised. When it came to Minato Dita had always had an absolutely unshakable faith that sooner or later she would win him over. "I've never heard you talk like this before. It almost sounds like you're giving up on him."

"I am," Dita announced. "Inoichi asked me to marry him. I said yes."

"Whoa! You're actually giving up on Minato-kun!" Mai had always assumed that Dita would end up with Inoichi. He loved her and she loved him, had it not been for Minato they likely would have already been married. But Mai had always thought Dita would not give up on Minato until he was actually married.

"Yeah, I'm giving up. If Minato-kun is willing to go so far for someone else then I'm finally convinced there's no chance for me. Besides," she smirked. "I kind of like being with someone who actually wants me. I love Inoichi and I know he loves me. I think we'll be really happy together."

Mai nodded and sipped her drink.

"What about you?" Dita asked.

"What about me?"

"Are you going to keep chasing him or admit defeat?"

"Why should I give up?" Mai said stubbornly. "It's not like he's married or anything."

"He might as well be," Dita again sighed. "Like it or not he's *chosen* Mai. Married or not the red head is living with him now and doing it openly, the whole village knows. Face it, she's not going anywhere. Minato wants her, and that's that. You can keep chasing him if you want but what's the point? The race is over and we know who won."

Mai looked down at her nearly empty glass and said nothing.

"Here, let's have one more toast." Dita took what was left in the bottle and filled both their glasses. She then held up her own. "To Minato-kun, the one that got away."

Mai lifted her glass and clinked it against Dita's. "To Minato-kun."

They both emptied their drinks.

"I still hate that bitch though," Dita said.

"Me too."

---

On the night of the coronation Minato wore the robes of the Hokage for the first time. He did not have a clan or family to accompany him on the traditional walk. But he was not entirely bereft of company. His sensei, Tsunade, Shizune, and Sarutobi (who was NOT in his robes) would all accompany him. And on his arm was Kushina, radiant in her kimono and walking proudly beside him. Before they set out from his estate Sarutobi looked at his successor and spoke very quietly.

"You know Minato, some people might object to Kushina walking at your side. Given her... status within the village."

Kushina looked at Minato nervously. To walk at his side arm in arm, that was the proper place for the wife. But not the mistress. "If you don't want..." She began to take her hand from his arm.

He placed a warm hand over hers and placed it back down. "I want you beside me Kushina, always."

Smiling at him she nodded.

As they walked through the streets on their way to the Tower the people cheered for Minato loudly and longly. They cried out for his success and long life.

And if some of them sent some unhappy looks her way it was not enough to spoil the wonderful mood.

---

Minato stood atop the Tower gazing down happily at the crowd gathered below. "From this day forward!" He shouted out. "I will guide and protect the village of Konoha, for I am the Fourth Hokage!" He placed the hat on.

From below rose a joyous cry as all of Konoha celebrated the ascension of their beloved Minato to the throne.

Minato turned to look at the people gathered on the roof of the Tower with him.

Sarutobi stepped forward and was the first to bow. "Hokage-sama."

"I'm very proud of you Minato," Tsunade told him and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before bowing to him. "Hokage-sama."

"Hokage-sama," Shizune said and bowed.

Jiraiya laughed. "Don't get used to it." He then bowed. "Hokage-sama."

Kushina looked over at him and smiled.

Minato rubbed the back of his head in embarrassment. "You don't have to if you don't want to."

She carefully stepped up to him and whispered in his ear. "Not because you are my Hokage, but because you are my husband and dearest love." She stepped back and bowed. "Hokage-sama."

One by one everyone present bowed to him and proclaimed him Hokage. Afterwards the fireworks began. Minato put both arms around Kushina and held her close as they watched the fireworks together.

---

"Want to go shopping?" Hyuuga Hannah asked.

"Sure!" Kushina answered happily. It had been a couple of months since Minato-kun had become Hokage. People were growing used to her presence. But she still got hard looks from strangers when she was not with Minato. Hannah had taken the role of her best friend and confidant. She was a very kind and dignified woman. She was a

model of what was best of the Hyuuga clan, intelligence, refinement, culture, while lacking the sense of inherent superiority that bothered so many.

As they went through the streets on their way to the shopping district Kushina again saw the looks from people. They were not as blatant as normal given who she was with, but they were still there.

"Does it bother you what others think?" Hannah asked politely.

Kushina looked over at her. Even without her byakugan the woman saw much. "Not really, their opinions don't really matter to me."

"But it would be better if they were more accepting of you," Hannah reasoned.

"Well of course," Kushina admitted. "But I'm not going to hold my breath. Minato knows my worth and so do some other people like you, Hiashi, and Hizashi. That's enough for me."

Hannah had a birdlike smile. "Do you know I admire you Kushina?"

"Really?"

Hannah nodded. "I have been brought up to always concern myself with appearance and reputation, as has my beloved Hiashi. It is necessary given our position within the village. But I have often wished it were not. I have often wanted to be free of such concerns and show people my true face. I also dislike the mask my husband puts on in public. I wish we could smile and be at ease as you and Minato always seem to be."

Kushina laughed. "Well Minato is.... Minato and I was brought up an Uzumaki. My clan doesn't really worry about appearance too much we were brought up to be, well..." She struggled to find the right word.

"Lighthearted? Carefree?" Hannah offered.



"I was going to say, 'loud and way too emotional' but I think I like yours better."

Hannah put a hand over her mouth and giggled.

---

"Any word on Orochimaru?" Minato asked.

Jiraiya frowned and shook his head. "Nothing I'm afraid. It's like he has vanished."

Shortly before the coronation the Third Hokage had finally confronted Orochimaru and caught him literally red handed in the midst of his grisly secret lab. The Third had failed to either kill or arrest him and he had fled. Despite every effort there had been no sign of Orochimaru since.

"I suppose it would be too much to hope he suddenly developed a conscience and did the honorable thing." Minato wondered aloud.

Jiraiya snorted.

"Well, we'll find him sooner or later. Hopefully it'll be before too many innocents have died."

"We can only hope," Jiraiya agreed quietly.

---

They were on their favorite bench in the rose garden. She was curled up on his lap, her arms wrapped around his neck. Their lips and hearts entwined. This was their special place, even more than their bedroom this was the place where their feelings seemed to come out the most easily. As they kissed Kushina let one hand slip down to begin to unbutton his shirt.

"Here?" He asked heatedly, and began to run his tongue along her throat.

"Here," she answered eagerly and began unbuttoning with both hands. Minato's hand found the zipper to her bodysuit and pulled down.

---

Around an upstairs window most of the servants had gathered as they always did when the two of them went to the rose garden. When Kaede saw Minato-sama's trench coat and shirt tossed aside and Kushina suddenly topless the head maid's face turned a deep shade of red.

"That's enough!" She said loudly and pulled the curtain down over the window. "Everyone back to work!"

Despite her swift actions most of the servants had knowing grins on their faces as they left.

Later that day Kaede cornered Kushina. "I would like to have a word with you, Kushina-san."

Kushina wound up being sat down and lectured about the dangers of lewd act committed in public.

Kushina thought it had to be the most embarrassing experience in her life.

---

About a month late Minato arrived home to find Kushina wearing the oddest little grin on her face. "Is something wrong?"

"Hmmm, well that would depend on your definition of wrong," Kushina said trying to sound mysterious. "In this case I wouldn't think there was anything wrong."

"All right what's going on?" He asked.

"I was feeling a little sick this morning so I went to see the doctor."

"Wait, you saw the doctor? Kushina are you sick?" Minato said worriedly.

She put a finger to her lips and looked like she was considering that. "Well I caught something when we were in the rose garden but I wouldn't call it a sickness. Though I have a condition."

"A condition?" Now Minato sounded really worried. "Is it serious?"

She nodded. "Very serious, but I should be over it in about another eight months."

"Eight months? What sort of condition is this? How did you get it?"

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "You gave it to me."

"I did? Are you sure?"

"Very sure." She saw understanding begin to dawn on him.

"Does that mean I have this too?"

She burst out laughing. "I *really* hope not. That would be *really* hard to explain to people."

"Huh?" He looked completely confused.

"Baka!" She playfully pretended to give him a noogie. "How did you end up becoming Hokage when you're so dense? I'm PREGNANT."

He looked at her in shock. "You're pregnant?" He whispered.

She laughed. "Yeah, you knocked me up good Minato-kun honey."

Minato let out a shout of pure joy and picked her up in his arms and began to twirl her about as she laughed.

---

That night they were lying in bed together and Minato gently rested his hand on her tummy.

"There's nothing to feel," Kushina told him as she played with his hair. "He isn't even the size of a grape yet."

"He?" Minato looked at her excitedly. "It's a boy?"

"Well it's too soon to tell officially, but I think it's boy."

"Woman's intuition?"

"Yeah," she placed her hand over Minato and they both rested them on her belly. "Somehow I just know this will be a boy and he'll be just like you Minato-kun. He'll be strong and handsome and kind and I know he'll be amazing."

Minato smiled and had a faraway look as though he could already see his future son. "I'll teach him everything I know. I'll give him all my knowledge and I'll teach him to love this place and the people who live here."

Kushina smiled down at her stomach. "And I'll teach him the sword and about the Uzumaki. I'll tell him stories about his uncle Shinzou and about my family." She looked at Minato seriously. "I want him to see Whirlpool and visit the clan there."

Minato nodded. "When he's older we'll take him." The child was not even born yet and they were already making plans. "We'll turn the bedroom next door into a nursery and I'll make sure *no one* comes near him unless they can be trusted."

Laughing she spoke to her belly. "Do you hear that little one? Your daddy and I are going to take good care of you!" But then after a moment she looked at Minato more seriously. "Minato, what will his name be?"

"Well, I've always liked Arashi..."

"No, what will his *last* name be?" She clarified.

And with that Minato also took on a more serious look. "We've talked about this Kushina, I'll acknowledge him my son of course, but his last name will be Uzumaki. It's safest that way."

"And just how long will our son be a bastard in the eyes of this village?" She demanded. She was imagining her baby getting those same ugly looks from people and the thought filled her with fury.

"For a few years at least," Minato said. "Until I'm satisfied with the security for him."

"I want him to be legitimate by the time he is three," Kushina said firmly. "That's when he'll start to understand things. I don't want him to ever feel unworthy or unwanted. I want a promise from you Minato; he'll be a Namikaze by his third birthday."

"Kushina I can't..."

"Promise me," she said with absolutely no give in her.

Seeing as much Minato nodded. "All right, I promise he'll be legitimate by the time he is three."

---

Over the next few weeks Minato was busy casting seals all over the outer fence of the estate and over specific doors and windows of the mansion. He was using his ability as a seal master to create a single master seal to help secure his home.

---

A couple months later Hiashi and Hannah came over for dinner and had some news.

"I am pregnant as well," Hannah announced with a proud smile.

"Oh that's wonderful!" Kushina said and embraced her friend.

"And do you know what else?" Hannah asked. "I have a sure feeling it will be a girl."

"I know, I'm certain mine will be a boy." Kushina said.

The two friends eyed each other.

"So is it too soon to start planning their wedding?" Kushina said innocently.

All four of them laughed.

---

"My family will be coming!" Kushina said happily. By the time she had received the letter from her mother confirming it, it was September and she was very far along. "My parents, my brother

Temjin, and a bunch of my uncles, aunts and cousins will be coming here after he's born."

"It sounds like Naruto will be getting a whole lot of visitors," Minato said happily.

They had finally decided to name him after the hero in Jiraiya's debut novel. They had also gotten the unexpected bonus of having him agree to become their son's godfather.

"And my mother has decided to stay with us after everyone else leaves to help for awhile. She'll help me with raising him until I feel comfortable."

"Uhm, that's fine, but how long, is awhile going to be?"

Kushina shrugged. "Probably just a few months or so." She saw how disappointed he looked. "Don't worry Minato-kun honey, her room will be a safe distance, we can still have sex."

He turned a deep shade of red. "That's not what I was thinking about!"

"Suuuuure," she teased.

---

## October 8

Tsunade and Shizune returned through the gate. Shizune was markedly more excited about it than Tsunade was.

"It's so wonderful to be back!" Shizune said. "We haven't been here since the coronation!"

"I remember," Tsunade said dully.

Shizune looked at her sensei with a bit of a frown. "What's the matter Lady Tsunade? Surely you must be happy to be back after all this time."

"Must I?" Tsunade asked dryly. When she had originally set out with Shizune Tsunade had hoped time away would make her miss this place. That it would heal the resentments that were in her heart over how much she had lost due to the village. But instead her feelings had only grown harder. "Come on, let's go see Kushina and give her a check up."

---

Kushina was lying in her bed as Tsunade performed a diagnostic jutsu and placed her hand on her swollen belly. A dull green glow surrounded the hand s as it drifted this way and that over the stomach. Finally the glow dissipated.

"Well?" Kushina asked a bit nervously. Despite her excellent health she still couldn't help but feel worried.

Tsunade gave her an easy grin that set her mind at ease. "You've got a strong healthy baby, and you should give birth some time in this coming week." A tiny flicker of concern appeared. "I noticed that some of the blood vessels in the uterus are a bit weak."

"Is that a problem?" Kushina asked fearfully.

"No it shouldn't be," Tsunade answered. *Just so long as it's a normal birth everything should be fine.*

Kushina reached out and took Tsunade's hand. "Thank you for doing this. I know how you feel about this village, but I can't tell you what a relief it is knowing that you'll be the one delivering this child."

Tsunade nodded. "What are friends for? Anyway it makes me happy to know I'll be the very first face your son ever sees." Tsunade stood up and stretched. "Tell me is the pervert in town?"

Kushina laughed. "No, Jiraiya is off somewhere, no one knows where though."

Tsunade snorted. "Probably on one of those disgusting, 'research trips' of his. Well since it's safe I think I'll go to the bathhouse."

---

That night Kushina fell asleep beside Minato. Everything seemed fine, and the two of them looked forward to soon becoming parents.

---

## **October 9**

### **5:44 a.m.**

It came with the sound of breaking glass. Kushina and Minato both woke up to feel the room shaking.

"What's going on?" Kushina called out.

"It's an earthquake." Minato answered. Both of them sat up in bed. Minato wrapped his arms protectively around his wife.

After less than a minute the shaking subsided and then stopped completely.



"Are you all right?" Minato asked.

She nodded. "I'm fine, why didn't you ever tell me Konoha had earthquakes?"

"So far as I know this is the first." He got out of bed and hurried to shower and dress. "I'm sorry; I have to get to the Tower and see about the damage."

"Of course," she said.

"Hopefully there was nothing major."

---

Though they did not know it, this was the beginning of the end.

The apocalypse had come.

In the form of a nine tailed fox called Kyuubi.

# The terrible night

October 9

10:52 a.m.

He felt the floor beneath him shake yet again.

"You have got to be kidding me," Minato muttered. Fortunately none of his secretaries or assistants noticed. They were all too busy grabbing on to something. The Tower, along with the rest of the village, shook for a little more than a minute before the tremors subsided.

Minato judged this one had been a little more violent than the others. *It's not good that I'm starting to actually be expert enough to judge these things.* Less than a minute later Minato's silent opinion seemed to be proved correct as they heard a dull crash.

One of his secretaries hurried out of his office to the reception area. There she looked out of one of the south windows. That was the direction where the poorer neighborhoods in Konoha were. "I think a building collapsed," she called out. "I see a lot of dust from about four miles away."

"Contact the ANBU immediately and have them perform search and rescue," Minato ordered at once.

"The phone lines are still out Hokage-sama," another receptionist reminded him.

"Ah, never mind," he performed some hand signs. " **Kage Bunshin no Jutsu.**" A single shadow clone came into existence and then immediately vanished. There were advantages to being a ninja even in non combat situations. Minato looked at the floor around his desk. The reports he'd gotten had fallen all over the place.

A couple of his secretaries gathered them up for him. They were doing everything they could but unfortunately that wasn't much.

"I've never even heard of an earthquake anywhere near the village, and now we get three in one day? Can someone tell me what's going on?" Minato asked out loud. He noticed his secretaries all looking at each other with discomfort. The Hokage was supposed to be the one who knew all the answers. Seeing him so frustrated worried them.

*I can't let them see me be worried,* Minato reminded himself. Above all else the Hokage was a symbol of Konoha's strength and resilience. So he smiled and rubbed the back of his head. "Ah, never mind, whatever the cause we'll deal with it."

Miraculously the first two earthquakes had done no significant damage and there had been only about twenty casualties reported to Konoha hospital, all of them minor. There had been no deaths up until now. But with an apparent building collapse that was likely to change. He could only continue to do the best that he could and hope the worst was now over.

---

**11:22 a.m.**

His shadow clone had proceeded to the collapsed building to inspect the sight and assist with rescue. Getting the survivors and wounded to safety was the priority, clearing the mess could wait. His bunshin had done what it could. A four story tenement building had simply come crashing down, apparently burying many of its residents. Though only an estimate it looked like between twenty to thirty people might have been killed. While down there he had noticed cracks in the foundations of many of the other neighboring buildings. The buildings had not been designed with earthquakes in mind, and naturally the buildings in the poorer sections were of the weakest construction. When the bunshin dispelled the Hokage got all this information instantly. Knowing more earthquakes were a possibility he made a decision.

"I am declaring a state of emergency," he announced coolly. "Cancel all ninja missions and place all shinobi on standby. All schools are to be closed and have any additional staff report to the hospital. Open the cliff shelters; I want all residents of the poorer neighborhoods to be evacuated."

His secretaries took down his orders and got busy putting them into action. Since most of the phone lines were down a number of ninja had been called to the Tower to act as messengers.

Though Minato did not know it the real emergency had not started yet.

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**11:31 a.m.**

"Hokage-sama!" A ninja rushed into his office where seven others were busy working with him trying to manage things. "Hokage-sama! We just received a messenger bird from the city of Akido! The whole city's been destroyed!"

Minato looked at the ninja. A patch on his clothing indicated he was in the communications sector. "You shouldn't announce such things out loud," he told the man quietly. The nin immediately cast his eyes down in embarrassment. Minato then looked around at his staff, some were ninja but most were civilians who normally acted as secretaries. "Let's not have any wild rumors going around." He saw heads nod agreement. He knew rumors would spread soon regardless, but hopefully not for awhile.

Minato took the message and read it. Akido was a city of half a million located about 800 miles north, near the border of Waterfall. If they had suffered from these earthquakes too there was nothing he could do at the moment. When things here were settled he would see about dispatching some help. As he began reading the message he expected it to relate how the city had been closer to the epicenter and suffered for it.

But that wasn't what the message said.

*A giant fox with nine tails at least a hundred feet high?* He stared at the words. A giant nine tail fox? One made of living fire that had laid waste to the city. "Is this some type of joke? Or is there some possibility the translation was wrong?"

The communications ninja appeared very nervous. "Hokage-sama, I don't believe it to be a joke, messenger birds are too precious a resource to waste like that. And there was no translation, the message was not written in code. It... it almost seemed someone was desperate to get that message out."

Minato stared at the man a moment before looking back at the paper again. He had a real emergency on his hands right now; he didn't have time for bizarre mysteries that were happening hundreds of miles away.

And yet... there was something about that description, a nine tailed fox, that was vaguely familiar. There was some story that included a fox with nine tails. He couldn't remember anything more than that, but something about this bothered him. He dismissed the ninja who'd brought the message. He considered just putting this out of his mind in order to concentrate on the crisis at hand. But some instinct told him not to.

He looked to one of his secretaries. "It's probably nothing, but dispatch two full ANBU squads to Akido to investigate this, and make sure they have messenger birds with them." And having done that he did one other thing.

---

"Hey Kushina," Minato said as he walked in through the front door of his home.

"Minato-kun honey, what are you doing back?" Kushina asked. "I thought for sure you'd be in the Tower for the rest of the day."

"Well I am in the Tower right now, the real me is. I'm just a bunshin."

Kushina smiled at him warmly. "Were you worried about me?"

Minato looked embarrassed and began to rub the back of his head. "Well... actually I came here to do some research in the private library."

Curious to see just what sort of research would divert him in a time like this Kushina waddled along behind him as he went to the stacks and pulled out several books. She read the book titles and raised an eyebrow. "Ancient Fables, Stories of the Past, Of Heroes and Monsters," she looked at her husband's clone. "Just what are you researching?"

"I remember a story from when I was a child about a monstrous fox with nine tails. I've just gotten a report about it and I wanted to find out whatever I could. I'm almost sure Kaede read me a story with it when I was little."

"If she read it to you why don't you ask her about it, she might remember."

He looked at his wife with embarrassment. "Ah, I didn't think of that."

Kushina grinned at him. "How did you become Hokage again?"

---

"The nine tail fox? You mean the Kyuubi?" Kaede asked in her usual calm manner.

"I don't remember if that's the name of it, but yes, I need to know about it. Do you remember the story?" Minato asked.

"Certainly," she replied. She glanced at the books Minato had on the table. "But you won't find it in any of those books." She promptly went to a different section of the small library. She searched for a particular title. When she found it she pulled it down and brought it

out to him. Minato was surprised to see it was a history book entitled, 'The Battles of the First Hokage.' She opened it to section near the back. After flipping a few pages she nodded and handed the book over to him. "Here you are Minato-sama."

Minato took the book from her and was surprised to see an illustration of a fire breathing fox with nine tails and a rider on his back. "This fox was at a battle fought by the First Hokage? You mean he isn't out of some myth?"

"No Minato-sama," Kaede answered. "He was a monster summoned by Uchiha Madara at the Battle of the End. He is as real as Gamabunta. I remember my mother telling me the story when I was a little girl. It seems to have been forgotten over the years though."

Looking down at the illustration he got a very bad feeling.

---

**2:09 p.m.**

"Hokage-sama!" The same messenger ninja arrived again.

"Yes?" Minato answered warily.

"I have another message!"

"From Akido?"

"Uh, no Hokage-sama. It's from somewhere else."

Minato took the message and read it.

*' A giant monster is destroying Okazaki! Please send help at once!'*

There was no mention of it being a fox or any tails, but unless there was now a horde of giant monsters loose in the country side it had to be the same creature. *Now where exactly is Okazaki?* "Tell me, was this message sent in code?"

The ninja shook his head. "No Hokage-sama it was in plain language. It was probably sent by a civilian."

"Someone get me a map."

One of his secretaries had a large map of Fire country. When he found Okazaki on it he began to get a sick feeling in his stomach. It was located about a hundred miles south of Akido. The Kyuubi seemed to be heading south. In the general direction of Konoha.

"Get me Sarutobi, Tsunade, Hiashi and Fugaku," he said. "Tell them I am calling an emergency meeting here in the Tower."

---

**2:40 p.m.**

"The Kyuubi?" Sarutobi asked. "Are you certain Minato? I have not heard of it since the Battle of the End, when I was still a child."

Tsunade nodded. "My grandfather the First Hokage told me stories about it. A huge monster of living fire, no ninjutsu, and no weapon could harm it."

"The First won the battle so he *must* have found a way to deal with it." Minato argued.

Tsunade nodded. "Well it turns out it was vulnerable to my grandfather's mokuton techniques. He able to drain away the creature's chakra."

"Any chance you have those techniques?" Minato asked hopefully.

Tsunade shook her head. "I'm afraid not, and I am the last of the Senju clan so I'm afraid that blood line has gone extinct." (Note: At this time Tenzo aka Yamato is a child and his abilities have not manifested.)



"So how do I deal with an immensely powerful monster that can't be harmed by any weapon or ninjutsu?" Minato asked.

Neither Sarutobi nor Tsunade had a suggestion.

"Hokage-sama," Fugaku spoke. "Are you really worried about something you have only heard about from some panicked civilians?"

"I hate to say this," Hiashi spoke as well. "But Fugaku does have a point. How much stock can you put in civilian reports?"

"I agree that we do need more information," Minato said. "I've already sent out two ANBU squads, but they couldn't have gotten far enough north yet. That is why I've asked you both here. I want to send out two more patrols, and I want them to be made up of Uchiha and Hyuuga members. They would likely give me the best information given their blood lines."

"If you need a special patrol Hokage-sama then I will personally lead a squad of my clansmen north." Hiashi offered.

Hearing his arch rival make such an offer Fugaku responded immediately. "Then I will lead a squad of Uchiha. I will find this threat Hokage-sama and inform you how dangerous it really is."

Minato had not expected to have two of Konoha's most powerful clan heads to go out on patrol for him, including his best friend. But since they had volunteered he could not refuse their aid.

---

**3:37 p.m.**

A fourth earthquake struck Konoha. This one was easily the worst of the day. It lasted close to two minutes. When it was over nine buildings had collapsed, all of them in the poorer section of Konoha. Fortunately due to the mandatory evacuations earlier there were no casualties despite the heavy property damage.

---

**5:02 p.m.**

Two messenger birds came in, both from a town called Kochi. These had been placed in code. They were from a semi retired ninja who still acted as an informant. This was the first message received from a source considered reliable.

*' Kochi being attacked by some type of monster. Appears to be a huge fox approximately a hundred to a hundred and twenty feet. Has nine tails and seems to be made of fire. Has an immense chakra tainted with a palpable evil. Is able to breathe huge amounts of fire.'*

Both messages were exactly the same. Apparently the old ninja had wanted to try and make sure his message got through. Minato wondered if the man who sent it had survived.

Having now gotten a message from a former ninja the threat appeared far more serious. He again looked at the map. Kochi was less than five hundred miles away. With three plot points to work with something else was clear.

The Kyuubi really was heading for Konoha.

---

Ten kage bunshins were pouring over the books and scrolls of his library. It was clear to Minato that if ninjutsu would not affect this thing then the only other option was to seal it somehow. The problem was how to seal something as powerful as this fox seemed to be. If he tried to seal something like this into a scroll the jutsu was bound to fail. No scroll seal could possibly restrain something which could level whole cities. There had to be something else.

From the doorway to the library Kushina watched nervously. She had seen Minato go into battle and not appeared even slightly nervous. Now his clones all gave off an aura of worry bordering on panic. Seeing him this fearful made her worry as well.

---

**7:41 p.m.**

He received the first, and last, message from the ANBU he had originally sent out.

*' Have found nine tailed demon fox outside town of Morioka. Creature seems to possess immeasurable chakra with some sort of evil residue. Have attacked with no effect, seems utterly impervious to harm. Long Live Konoha!'*

Reading those last three words chilled him. It was something that was only said when the people knew there was no hope of survival. Two full patrols, eight brave ninja, were dead.

Morioka was only about three hundred fifty miles away. At the rate it was going it would reach Konoha in about seven hours.

---

**8:02 p.m.**

A force of one hundred left the village and headed north. Their mission was to try and engage the Kyuubi as far away as possible and delay it for as long as they could. Minato needed time to find the answer.

By this time there were rumors flying that some kind of demon had created the earthquakes and was now coming to attack the village. It was also at this time that Minato ordered mandatory evacuations for all non essential civilians. The whole village was to be evacuated to the cliff shelters except for the ninja and the civilians working in the hospital and other vital places.

---

**9:25 p.m.**

He received a message from Hiahsi and Fugaku. That they both signed it was proof of how important they thought their message was.

*' The Kyuubi is real and more powerful than could be believed, our attacks had no effect at all. Fugaku and I agree Kyuubi cannot be killed with regular jutsus no matter how powerful. Will trail and follow, is heading for Konoha.'*

Hiashi and Fugaku survived the encounter and were able to track the nine tail fox. Whatever would be said about them in the future no one would ever question their physical courage.

---

**9:50 p.m.**

Minato found a way. At least a possible way. In one of his oldest texts he read about an ancient master who claimed to be able to call on the power of a shinigami to aid him. There was no specific jutsu or seal, but the symbols provided gave him enough for a seal master to fill in the rest.

He had also found a long forgotten tome about, 'Biju' tailed beasts. He found a seal that could be used to bind a Biju to a human new born. Apparently only a human baby with an undeveloped chakra system was capable of successfully holding such a powerful being. The only problem with the seal in this situation was that he didn't believe it would work on the Kyuubi unless he could be rendered unconscious or weakened. According to the text about Biju it seemed even this seal would not work on a Biju who was at full strength and able to resist.

But if he could somehow combine the power of a shinigami with this seal he thought it might be possible to overwhelm the Kyuubi. But he had to invent a brand new jutsu in a matter of hours. And also it would require a human baby to act as a prison and a human sacrifice to access the Shinigami's power.

---

**11:41 p.m.**

He received a message from the force of one hundred ninja he had sent out.

*' Have attacked the nine tailed fox with all our might. It seems to be playing with us. We will press on. We are one hundred and forty miles north of the village. Long Live Konoha!'*

The next day three of those one hundred would make it back.

---

Reading that message he now knew there was only one choice. He called in Sarutobi and handed the reins of power over to him. He needed to go home and talk to his wife. Some things had to be said in person, not through a clone.

---

Kushina looked at him and turned pale. "What... what did you say?"

"This is the only possible way Kushina. Even so it only gives us a chance; there is no way for me to know if the jutsu will actually work until I use it. But if it fails everyone will likely die anyway. This is our only hope."

"For you to die?!" She yelled at him. "And for our child to have a *demon* put into him?! My kami how can you even suggest this! How can you do such a thing to our son?!"

"It is because he is my son that it has to be him." Minato said. "He is Namikaze and of my clan. One day when he comes of age he will be the clan head. Like it or not that birthright comes at a price. As my son and as a member of this clan it falls on him to make the sacrifice needed to save the village."

"Since when is he a Namikaze?!" She demanded furiously. "He'll be born an Uzumaki right?! Then why should he have to be sacrificed? You're talking about dying Minato! Isn't your life enough?!"

"Kushina..."

"No! Hell no!" She clutched her hands over her belly. "You are not using him for this! That's final! Let some other family make this sacrifice!"

"How can I do that?" He asked her calmly. "How can I ask some other family to make this sort of sacrifice when I refuse to? I don't want to do this Kushina, but it has to be. It's the only way."

She looked up at him and began shaking. Hot tears began to flow down her cheeks. "How... how can you talk like this? How can you be so calm?"

Her shaking grew worse and Minato gently wrapped his arms around her. "I'm sorry Kushina," he whispered tenderly. "I'm so sorry, I love you and I love our baby more than anything. But when I became Hokage I took an oath to guide and protect this village."

"You... you took an oath when we... we married too," she spoke through her sobs.

He held her a little tighter and nodded. "Yes I did," he said. "I swore to love you and protect you until the day of my death."

"Don't say that!" She wailed and clutched at him. "Oh Minato-kun honey, I love you! I love you so much! I can't bear to know you're going to die!"

"I love you too Kushina, I love you my red haired girl. When I do this it will be to protect you too."

She shook and buried her head against his chest. He was so warm, so alive; his loving arms were wrapped so tightly around her. How could she ever manage without him? He was her heart. How could she lose her heart and go on living? Through her tears she looked up at him. He was crying too.

"This... this really is the... the only way huh?"

He nodded. "It is."

"Oh Minato-kun, then... then I'll do what you ask. I'll let you use Naruto to hold this fox."

"Thank you Kushina," he leaned down and kissed her. "I promise you my sacrifice and our son's will not be in vain."

I know," she sobbed. She reached up and took his face into her hands. "Kiss me again Minato-kun honey, kiss me and kiss me and kiss me, give me all the kisses you can. Take my kisses with you into the next world and remember me until I can come and be with you again."

He did kiss her. He kissed her with all the love and devotion he had in his heart. This was their final goodbye.

*I could never forget you my darling, he thought. Even if it is karma that I spend all eternity in the shinigami's belly I will never forget you.*

During their many kisses midnight came and went. Neither of them noticed or cared that it was now October the tenth.

---

## **October 10**

**12:11 a.m.**

Tsunade met her at the hospital lobby with Shizune. The hospital was fully staffed but there was nothing going on at the moment. All the casualties from the earthquakes had been treated and were resting. But everyone felt the sense of doom approaching. The evacuation order, the dispatch of the one hundred, and the assembly of every available ninja had told people the worst was still coming. The rumors of a monster approaching were running wild, and she of course knew the truth. That there really was a monster coming. She also knew what Minato intended to do. He had informed both her and the old man. They had both pleaded with him to find some other

way. But he'd told them he had no other way and they had none either.

As she and Shizune wheeled her up to the operating room she tried to sound cheerful.

"As soon as we have you ready I'll cast a jutsu to induce labor. The baby is fully developed and you are strong and healthy so you should both be fine."

Kushina looked up at her and seemed exhausted, she didn't seem to have any emotions left. "What was it like when Dan died?"

"Wha... what?" Tsunade gasped.

"Minato is going to die and there's nothing I can do to save him," she said in a weary and broken voice. "I'm going to lose the only man I will ever love. How can I bear that?"

Tsunade looked lost. She didn't have an answer. She was still trying to find some way to bear that herself. "I don't know," she finally said. "But you're going to have another man in your life soon that you'll love too right? A tiny little man who is going to need you."

Kushina looked down at her belly and slowly nodded.

---

**1:58 a.m.**

The Kyuubi was only ten miles away now. The glow from its body could be seen lighting the western horizon. Every able bodied ninja went out the gate to make a desperate last stand to buy their Hokage the time he needed to complete the jutsu.

---

**2:19 a.m.**



In his library he put the last symbol down on the most complex formula he had ever come up with. He hoped it would work but there was no way to know until it was used.

"Minato," Sarutobi spoke in desperation. "I beg you to let me take your place. Let me do this! Konoha needs you far more than me!"

"Thank you for the offer," Minato said gratefully. "But as Hokage this is my burden to bear. Besides, I have no time to teach it to you. But there is one last thing you could do for me."

"Anything Minato!"

"My last wish is for the village to see my son as a hero. I know the kind of burden he will have to bear, but please, as a final favor to me do whatever you can for him and for Kushina."

Sarutobi nodded sadly. "I will, I swear it."

Minato gave him a wan smile. "Thank you Sarutobi." He gave him a last deep bow which Sarutobi returned. "Goodbye." He disappeared in a flash of yellow.

---

**2:24 a.m.**

He stood outside the operating room as his son was born. He watched as Tsunade handed him over to his mother and she spoke comfortingly to him. He carefully entered the operating room.

"Kushina I have to take him." He said, pain and regret racking him as he spoke. He would never see her beautiful face ever again. He would carry his memory of with her into the next world.

She looked up into his face. "No," she begged. "I take it back! You can't use him for this! Please Minato I beg you! Not for this! Isn't it enough that you're going to die? Must you do this to your own son?" Her voice was breaking.

"Whose child shall I choose?" Minato asked sadly. "How can I ask some other parent to make a sacrifice that I am not willing to make?"

"I don't care!" She wailed and held him closer. "It's too much to ask it's not fair!"

"No Kushina it's not." He agreed sadly. "But it must be done."

"I am sorry Kushina but you have to go into surgery right now." Tsunade put a needle in her arm and injected her.

"No... don't... don't..." Kushina closed her eyes.

Namikaze Minato, the Yondaime Hokage of Konohagakure took his new born son into his arms. He wept unashamedly. "Forgive me my darling wife; forgive me my beloved son for what I must do now." He looked at Tsunade. "Will she be all right?"

"I hope so but I can't guarantee it."

He nodded. He prayed that both she and Naruto would be all right. But he knew that whatever happened he would not be there to see. "Please tell her that I love her and am truly sorry, but this is the only way."

"I will tell her." Tsunade promised. *But she knows all ready.*

He looked at his crying son. "They'll see you as a hero my son. They will honor you for the sacrifice you make for their sakes."

He took his son out of the operating room before vanishing in a flash of yellow.

---

**2:33 a.m.**

The western Horizon was filled with light, night had become day. The Kyuubi was now only a couple miles from the gate. Looking out he could see it clearly, all nine tails were whipping about. He could

sense the immensity of its power and its evil even at this distance. On the table in front of him his son was crying. Minato wondered just how much the child understood, if on some instinctual level he knew the danger. He had drawn the seal on his boy's belly. It would only suppress half the demon's chakra, his son would have the chance to slowly incorporate and use the other half. He had faith his son would grow up strong and loyal to the people of Konoha. He had an unshakable faith that his boy would use the Kyuubi's power to safeguard the village. He performed a single hand sign. **"Seal!"**

The ink on his son's stomach glowed for an instant and then became permanent. He carefully lifted the child up. "My brave son," he whispered. "My precious boy. You are a hero." He gently placed a kiss on his forehead. "I love you."

He performed his jutsu and together they vanished in a yellow flash.

---

**2:36 a.m.**

"The Yondaime is here!" The cry rang out and the weary frightened ninja drew fresh hope. Their hero had come. The man who was the best of them.

"All ninja retreat to the village!" He shouted. Holding his newborn with one hand he bit down on the thumb of the other . **"Kuchiyose no Jutsu!"**

With a massive puff of smoke the boss toad summons appeared. "Minato!" Gamabunta boomed what's going on here?" Gamabunta stared at the fearsome nine tail fox that was just across the field from him. "What the hell is the Kyuubi doing here?"

"You know him?" Minato asked.

"I know of him," Gamabunta said.

"He wants to destroy my village I have to stop him."

Gamabunta grunted. "Kid, I hate to say this, but I'm no match for him. In raw power I am just not in his league."

"That's all right, I have a plan."

Gamabunta noticed the child in Minato's arm. "You're going to work a sealing jutsu aren't you? You know what it'll cost you right?"

"I know," he said. "And I am ready to make the sacrifice."

"Damn it," Gamabunta growled. "All right, if you're willing to do this then I guess I can't not do my part."

"Thank you Gamabunta; just get me as close to him as you can."

"Right!" With that the toad summons raced in.

Up until this moment the Kyuubi had seemed to be at play. A massive cat tormenting a whole army of helpless mice. As Gamabunta approached the Kyuubi's head snapped up and a feral grin filled it's malevolent face. **What's this? A little frog come to play with me?**

"I'm a toad!" Gamabunta roared furiously. As he did so he drew his sword and tried to strike at the fox's head.

Laughing the Kyuubi made no attempt to dodge. The sword struck cleanly, it also broke cleanly. The Kyuubi's right claw shot out and tore into Gamabunta's face. Blood poured out from a deep wound. A wound that would likely leave a scar.

**Stupid frog, do you think you're a match for me?**

"He is not the tone you need to be worried about!" Minato shouted. "I am the Fourth Hokage of Konoha and I will stop you right here and now!"

The fox put back its head and roared out with laughter. **Only the damn Uchiha or one of the Senju could do me any harm and**

**you are not either. Fourth Hokage you say? Well after I eat you I'll eat everyone in your village too. There won't be a Fifth Hokage.**

"There will be," he said. "As long as there is a village there will be someone else who will guide and protect it. I am Namikaze Minato the Yondaime Hokage of Konohagakure and I will give my life to save my home and my people." He worked the seals. "**Shiki Fujin no Jutsu** !" Behind him the skeletal apparition took shape. "I summon a god of death to aid me in my task! Take my life and in exchange work my will!"

The Kyuubi stared at the death god, a demon he was able to see it clearly. The Shinigami reached out and placed a hand on the Kyuubi's forehead. Instantly the Kyuubi was held fast in place. Before the death god a human image appeared seeming to be made of mist. This was Minato's soul. The mist began to be consumed; Minato could feel his life beginning to fade away.

The Kyuubi's body began to dissolve into a fine red mist. As he was forced to watch helplessly his tails and legs vanished. The mist flowed from him to the human. It was drawn as if through a vortex into the seal on the baby's stomach, vanishing as it touched.

**What is this! I am a Demon Lord! You cannot do this!** The Kyuubi howled.

"Even a demon is no match for a death god it seems," Minato said. "So long as I pay the price required of me my contract with the shinigami will be fulfilled. You will be trapped within my son for a human lifetime, and then you will die."

The Kyuubi was horrified. Already about half of his corporal body had vanished. **Wait! I will make a bargain with you Fourth Hokage! Stop this and I will leave here never to return!**

"It's much too late for that," Minato said. "You should never have come."

The Kyuubi howled and cursed as he slowly vanished.

At last all of him was gone. His chakra and essence were now within Naruto.

Their bargain complete the shinigami hurriedly devoured the last of Minato's soul. "Gamabunta... please... get my son... to the hospital."

"I will Minato, don't worry I'll see him safe."

With his last strength he gently put his son down on Gamabunta's head. "Goodbye my son, I love you."

Those were the last words of the Yondaime. His soul consumed in payment he closed his eyes and died.

## Fear and anger

She sat alone in the nursery breast feeding her son. Naruto was very hungry. Kushina looked down at his tiny little face. With his crop of blond hair and blue eyes he was Minato's living image, his living legacy. Only those scars on his cheeks hinted he was anything other than an ordinary baby. The seal her husband had placed on his stomach was invisible now. It would only appear again when he was old enough to use chakra. In every visible way he was just a baby.

She wondered how Fugaku and the others could not see that. The way they had demanded her son's death still shocked and horrified her. She was simply grateful for the support of Sarutobi, Tsunade, and Hiashi. With their help she had been recognized as Minato's widow and as head of the Namikaze clan, with access to its wealth and place on the Council. They had also succeeded in squashing any more talk of killing her son or turning him into a living weapon.

"No one is going to hurt you my little Naru-chan," she whispered to her baby. "As long as I'm alive I'll protect you and make sure you are happy, no matter what."

She understood that after the tragedy the village had suffered feelings were running high. The Council was made up of the most respected and well educated men and women in Konoha. If *they* were screaming for blood she didn't want to think of what the masses were saying. People were scared and angry and wanted to take out those feelings on someone. They wanted a *victim* and for them her son was an obvious choice. Never mind the fact he was the son of the man they all loved, the man who was the village's savior. Somehow that didn't seem to matter at all.

*Hopefully the anger will die down with time and things can get back to normal.*

---

A crowd of about a thousand villagers were coming down the street. They carried torches and bats and broken bottles. A few had poles with dead foxes tied at the other end. They were all shouting about revenge and about killing the demon. They were filled with anger and they were determined that the thing they all feared would be killed once and for all.

As they came to the Namikaze gate they saw two women standing there waiting for them. One was a dark haired girl who appeared a little nervous. The other was a slightly older woman with blonde hair tied in two long pony tails.

"Just what the hell do you people think you are doing?!" Tsunade snapped as they approached.

"Get out of the way!"

"We want the demon!"

"He has to die!"

The crowd pressed on obviously expecting the two of them to stand aside.

Tsunade lifted her foot and slammed it down making the ground shake and tearing open the street right in front of the gate. People cried out as they were all knocked off their feet and about twenty shouted in real fear as they fell down into the new pit in the ground.

"You listen up!" Tsunade screamed and let them get a full dose of her killer intent. "If any of you so much as lays one finger on my godson I'll break you in half! That baby has nothing to do with what happened and is Minato's own son! How can you want to hurt him?!"

"He's a monster!" Someone shouted.

"He's a baby you ass! He can't even crawl and you think he's some threat?"



"Why are you protecting him?" A you girl no older than thirteen cried out. "He killed my father!"

"No, the Kyuubi did that," Tsunade said. "I am sorry for your loss, I truly, truly am. I know what it's like to lose people dear to you because they fought to protect the village. But Naruto did not kill your father the Kyuubi did that. Naruto is the living prison that holds the Kyuubi. And a jailer is not the same as the prisoner he guards."

"We don't care!" One man howled. "Give us the Kyuubi or we'll kill you instead!"

The crowd screamed its agreement.

Tsunade grinned. Making a fist she brought down onto the concrete sidewalk. The people watched as it was reduced to instant debris. "If you cowardly fools think you can kill me come on and try! While the real Kyuubi was attacking all of you were hiding in the shelters while Minato and the ninja of this village fought to save you. But when you're up against a *baby* then you find your courage! Get out of here before I lose my patience! I don't have much so you had better go now!"

"You're one of the Sannin!" A man hidden within the crowd shouted. "How can you protect that monster?"

"The only monsters around here are you people. Anyone who wants to kill a helpless new born is a monster as far as I'm concerned. Now get out! I won't tell you again."

The crowd glowered and cursed her, but did not have the nerve to come even one step closer to her. Slowly they began to leave.

"I can't believe the people are so angry," Shizune said.

"Well fear is an excellent soil to grow anger in. They're afraid and this is the result," Tsunade said. "I just hope it doesn't last long."

---

On the other side of the estate four men quickly scaled the eight foot high iron fence. All of them were armed with daggers. Together they ran into the woods that covered the perimeter of the entire estate. They barely got under cover before they heard dogs barking. Out of the darkness a pack of dogs rushed at them snarling and barking. Taken off guard all the men shouted. Two tried to defend themselves while two tried to get back to the fence. All of them were brought down and pinned by the dogs.

"You men are all under arrest for trespassing onto clan property with intent to do harm." An ANBU with a dog mask and crazy silver hair appeared among them.

"Wait!" One of the men called desperately. "We're just trying to protect the village by killing the damn demon! Help us!"

The ANBU turned to him and shook ever so slightly. "You really want to shut up now. That, 'demon' is the only son of my beloved sensei. If you say one more word I'll cut your throat right here and now."

The man paled and very wisely remained silent.

---

The following morning Tsunade, Shizune, Rin, and Kakashi met Kushina and Naruto. The first four of them had been up all night protecting the estate while mother and son got some much needed sleep.

Though very tired Tsunade was checking on Kushina's condition while Rin was looking at Naruto.

---

"You really ought to be back at the hospital you know," Tsunade muttered.

"We've been over that," Kushina answered. "I can better protect my son here, so this is where I'll stay."

"You're not in condition to protect anyone right now," Tsunade told her. "Your body is still recovering from the trauma of the birth. You very nearly died you know."

Kushina nodded and grinned. "I'm just lucky I had the world's top medic nin to pull me through and get me better."

"Don't take this lightly!"

"I'm not Tsunade, I'm not," Kushina said in a more somber tone. "But with the way things are I can't take it easy. How long before I've recovered?"

"Probably two months or so until you're fully recovered."

"Let me rephrase the question, how long until I can use jutsus and fight with my sword?"

Tsunade frowned at her. "Maybe a week, but if you push hard you'll be in pain."

"I can handle pain," Kushina said. *The pain in my body at least.*

---

"What a cutie you are! Yes you are! Yes you are!" Rin spoke in a high pitched baby voice as she cradled Naruto in her arms.

Kakashi was looking down over her shoulder. "He really does look like sensei's son."

"He sure does," Rin said. "You want to hold him?"

"No, no I better not! I'd be afraid I'd drop him."

Rin turned around and held Naruto out to him. "Oh you're not going to drop him. Here."

"No! That's really o.k." He began to back away from her.

"Come on take him!" Rin insisted and stepped forward.

"I don't want to!"

"Why not?"

"I told you I might drop him." He continued backing up and Rin kept coming forward with the baby.

"You're not going to drop him now here take him." Finally Kakashi's back thumped against a wall and Rin had him cornered. She carefully put him in Kakashi's arms. "Just support his head; there see you're a natural!"

To his own surprise he was holding little Naruto and he was still in one piece. "Heh, I guess I am."

Rin stood next to him and smiled happily. "You're going to be a wonderful father when we have our own."

"What?!"

With Kakashi's shout Naruto began to cry.

---

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tsunade asked.

"Of course, I want to honor not just Minato but all the brave ninja who gave their lives." She Tsunade, Shizune, Rin and Kakashi all had mourning clothes on. "Naruto will be safe enough with the Hyuuga clan while we're at the service."

"It's not Naruto I'm worried about right now," Tsunade said quietly. "The villagers are scared and angry. They are not in a forgiving mood right now. If they see you there things might get ugly."

Kushina turned to her friend and spoke with a firm unyielding voice. "I will burn in hell before I will let a bunch of ignorant villager keep me from honoring my husband and the other fallen heroes."

Tsunade shut her eyes in exasperation. "I swear sometimes I think you *like* making things hard for yourself."

Kushina shrugged. "I was raised an Uzumaki. We're not the sort to worry about how hard something might be."

Kaede entered the room. She too was in mourning clothes and would attend the memorial. "Kushina-sama, we have a visitor."

"Kaede *please* stop calling me that."

"You are now head of the Namikaze, and all who live in this house serve Namikaze. As such that is the only appropriate manner in which to address you Kushina-sama."

Kushina sighed. "Who is it? Have Hiashi and Hannah come to walk with us?"

"No," Kaede said simply. It is Jiraiya."

---

Jiraiya was sprawled out on a couch and seemed completely worn out. "I was in Grass when I heard. I got back here as fast as I could."

Kushina nodded in sympathy. If he had been here... well things would have played out the same she was sure. He would have done what he could, that she didn't doubt. "Thank you for coming here as quickly as you could. At least you made it in time for the memorial; I know that would please him."

Tsunade nodded and for once held back her sharp tongue. "It's good that you're here now."

"I heard what happened on the way here, so... Minato is really gone?" he looked at their faces with a desperate plea. Until he heard it from them he still had the tiniest hope that everything he'd heard was somehow wrong. But Kushina, Tsunade, and Kakashi all

nodded their heads. Jiraiya's last bit of hope died. "Oh Minato," he said mournfully.

Kushina reached out and gently took his hand. "Come on, let's go and say good bye to him."

"What about Naruto? Is he all right?"

"He's fine," Kushina answered. "Despite what the village and Council might like."

"What does that mean?"

"It means that most of the people in this village are a bunch of damn fools who can't tell the difference between an infant and a 2,000 ton demon!" Tsunade said. She quickly related some of the recent events.

"I don't believe it!" Jiraiya said. "He's Minato's son!"

"People don't seem to care much about that, except for who you see here, Sarutobi, the Hyuuga and a few others." Kushina said.

"Well you can count on me; I'll do whatever I can to help my little godson."

"I'm glad to hear that," Kushina said. "I actually have a problem you might be able to help me with."

"What?"

She gently took his hands and carefully helped him to his feet. "I'll tell you about it after the service, now we have to go or we'll be late."

# The memorial

In the distance bells tolled. The plaza was filled to overflowing with mourners. The whole village was here, or near enough. They stood in silence. Here and there people cried quietly. Some spoke prayers or whispered words of comfort to loved ones. They had all come honor those who had died to protect them.

But above all most of them had come to honor one man in particular.

Namikaze Minato, Yondaime Hokage, Konoha's Yellow Flash, and their savior. To the people of Konoha he was more than just a hero, he was a symbol of everything that was good and worthwhile about their village. He had been the best of them, and to most of the people here his loss hurt just as much as the loss of a loved one.

From the very back of the crowd there was a stir. People looked to see a group walking towards the Tower where more than three hundred portraits were on display. When they saw who it was many in the crowd began to feel anger. How dare *she* come here! Many felt her presence to be nothing but a mockery of their beloved Yondaime's memory.

---

She saw the looks on their faces as she led the others towards the Tower. Except for Jiraiya they were all dressed in mourning clothes like everyone else. But it seemed that even now she stood out. Along with the ugly looks she heard their mutters.

"Damn whore..."

"... completely shameless!"

"Stole what was his!"

"... because of her..."

"Mother of a demon, she..."

Every harsh look and every word fed her anger. *What a bunch of hypocrites they all are! They loved Minato, worshipped the ground he walked on. But they can't stand me even though I'm his widow. To them I'm still just the foreign whore who seduced their hero. And if Naruto were here right now they'd want to tear him apart even though he is Minato's only child. What monsters they all are!*

Her hand twitched a bit. She wanted her katana. She wanted to wade into this crowd and *really* give them something to fear.

Instead she kept silent and walked on with her head held high. She had *nothing* to be ashamed of. She had loved him with all of her heart and he had loved her. She had been his devoted and faithful wife and would be a faithful widow now. She had already decided she would never allow anyone else into her bed. Minato had been her one and only, she could never be with anyone else.

And as for their precious son she was going to love him and protect him. Not only was he her little baby, he was Minato's legacy, the last true Namikaze. Whatever the village or the Council thought he was going to grow up to be a great man.

She would see to that no matter what.

As she and the others approached the front of the Tower a man with bandages on the right half of his face stepped out in front of her. His hair was mostly grey with a few strands of black mixed in. "You can't go any further," he announced.

Despite the bandages they all recognized him.

"What are you doing Sobou? Get out of the way!" Tsunade growled. He was one of the top ninja in the village, an elite Jonin they all knew and respected.



Sobou looked directly at Kushina. "You have no right to be here, you are not from this village. This ceremony is for the people of Konoha." Throughout the crowd people nodded their agreement.

"I am not from here," she said tightly. "But I *am* a citizen of Konoha, though kami knows I am no leaf nin, I became one when I married Minato."

Sobou frowned angrily. "No one believes that! I don't know how you fooled Sarutobi but everyone knows you were never anything but Minato's woman. You were *never* his wife."

"That is not true!" Tsunade said loudly. "Jiraiya and I were both at her wedding and witnessed their marriage. They were actually married more than a year and a half ago!"

"That's right!" Jiraiya shouted. "Minato loved her and only her. He kept the marriage a secret in order to try and protect her. Kushina was his wife, end of story!"

Hearing her two friends publicly defend her made her feel a bit happy. Seeing the look on Sobou's face and on the faces of others on the crowd also made her happy. "I have come here to place a flower down in memory of my husband," Kushina told him. "And not you or everyone here will keep me from doing so."

"Disgraceful," Sobou said. "I don't care what *anyone* says. You're being here is an insult to the good people who have come here to mourn. And so is your protecting that demon you..."

"Careful!" Tsunade jumped forward and put her nose an inch away from his. "Careful what you say or you may break the Hokage's new law. You also want to be careful talking about my *godson* or I may take offense."

Sobou for his part did not back down and did not seem intimidated even facing an angry Sanin. "How can you say that when you know what he is?"

"I can say it *because* I know what Naruto is, a helpless and innocent baby. It's you and these other idiots who don't know what he is." Tsunade said loudly.

"You people should have more faith in Minato's work," Jiraiya said. "He was the world's top seal master, he even surpassed me. Do you really think he would have made a seal for his **son** that could even possibly fail? If he put the seal on Naruto then there is no chance of what was trapped ever being let out."

"Is there a problem here?" A familiar voice spoke. Though dressed like the rest of them the people immediately recognized the Third Hokage. The crowd drew back and people gave him respectful bows.

Seeing him Sobou also bowed.

"Hey old man," Jiraiya greeted.

Sarutobi nodded to him. "I am glad to see you were able to attend this service Jiraiya." He looked at the rest of them. "This is a memorial," he said quietly. "It is a time for healing and remembrance. This is not the time for confrontations or arguments."

"Of course," Kushina replied and bowed. "That is the last thing I want."

Sobou nodded respectfully. "I apologize Hokage-sama. You are correct this is neither the time nor the place." He sent a last glance to Kushina and stepped back into the crowd.

"Come, let us pay our respects," Sarutobi invited.

---

The picture was of him in his robes with a huge smile on his face. She was glad; she had always loved that smile. Before the portrait there was already a huge stack of white flowers. She simply placed hers down among them and brought her hands together in prayer

and she shut her eyes. *Please wait for me Minato-kun honey, please be patient. One day we will be together again.*

One by one the others with her placed down their flowers and made their silent offerings. For the very first time she could remember Kushina saw tears from Kaede as she put her flower down.

When the offerings were complete they headed back just the way they had come.

---

"He really does look just like his father," Jiraiya said as he saw Naruto for the very first time.

"Yeah he does," Kushina agreed happily.

Jiraiya smirked. "He's going to have to beat the girls off with a stick."

"Probably," Kushina said with a laugh.

He carefully looked at her as the child slept in his crib. "I never imagined it could be so bad... that crowd at the memorial. How could they be so unforgiving?"

"I don't know," Kushina said. "And to be honest I don't really care either. Until things calm down I intend to keep Naruto right here or with the Hyuuga when I can't be with him. That's what I wanted to talk to you about."

Jiraiya looked very unhappy. "I'm sorry Kushina, but I won't be able to stay and help you. Right now I'm still working on expanding my spy network and my top priority is trying to find Orochimaru. I'll make sure to visit Konoha as often as I can to check on you and the kid, but I can't stay. As a matter of fact I'll have to leave tomorrow."

"But you just got here!"

"I know, but it can't be avoided."

Kushina looked very unhappy. "But I need you to help me! Minato set seals over the mansion and the estates to help guard us from intruders. But now that Minato is gone I don't have any way to use them."

"I see," Jiraiya said. "Well, I could teach you how to manipulate them but that would take months."

"Isn't there anything you can do?"

He thought about it for a moment. "Well... if you don't mind having a tattoo I could make a master seal and connect it to the ones Minato placed." He looked apologetic. "It would have to remain visible at all times I'm afraid. It'll be a seal, but it will appear as a tattoo."

"Fine," she said immediately. "If it helps me protect my son I don't mind."

---

That evening Jiraiya placed a master seal that covered all of Kushina's left forearm. Wanting to be a bit artistic he chose to render the seal in the form of a tree with one hundred and thirty two leaves, each one numbered and drawn in black ink. Whenever anyone entered a room that had been warded or crossed a section of the fence she would get a sensation in her arm and the corresponding, 'leaf' would change from black over to red. She would now instantly be aware of any intruders who entered her property without permission.

Early the next morning Jiraiya left. He promised to return as often as he could.

"Take good care of my little godson, when he gets older I plan on making him my student." Jiraiya said with a grin.

"Who says you're going to be his sensei?" Tsunade asked. "I plan on instructing him."

"What are going to teach the kid? How to be a medic nin?" Jiraiya made a face that showed what he thought of that.

"What's wrong with being a medic nin?" She demanded angrily.

"I could tell you but I don't have all day."

"Why you annoying, perverted, monkey faced idiot!" Tsunade shouted.

"Hey!" Jiraiya snapped. "Take that back! I don't have a monkey face!"

"Enough you two!" Kushina said sharply. "He is still just a baby; he won't be ready for training for years yet. When he is you can both teach him."

That didn't rally satisfy either of them but hey left it at that for the time being.

---

Later that day Kakashi approached her about something.

"Kushina, those men I captured were arrested while on your property. According to Konoha law you have the right to punish them in any way you see fit, up to and including execution." He looked at her curiously. "What do you want done with them?"

Kushina thought about it for a moment. "Please have the ANBU let them go."

"Just let them go? Don't you want them punished?"

"Yes I do," she said flatly. "I'd like to have them whipped and then have salt rubbed in their open wounds." She gave Kakashi an unhappy grimace. "But I think it's best if I just let this go. If I punish these men it will only stir up more anger in the village. I just want things to calm down and for people to stop hating my son."

Kakashi thought about it and slowly nodded. If it had been up to him they'd have spent the rest of their lives in prison. "That probably is the best answer. Hopefully it helps quiet things."

"Let's hope."

---

At the end of the week Tsunade grudgingly admitted that Kushina was no longer in any danger and had recovered enough to use her ninja abilities again.

At the Namikaze gate she her apprentice and Kushina were saying their goodbyes.

"Now remember, you promised to visit me and Naruto at least once a year." Kushina said.

"I haven't forgotten," Tsunade said. "Though with everything I've seen over the last week I don't like this place any better." She looked at Kushina worriedly. "Are you *sure* you'll be all right?"

"I'll be fine," she promised. "I have Rin to check on my health and Naruto's. I have Sarutobi, Kakashi, Hiashi, Hannah, Hizashi and the rest of the Hyuuga. Plus I've sent a letter out to my family in Whirlpool. I expect my parents, my brother, and a bunch of my clan to be here some time in the next week. Naruto and I will both be fine."

"I'm still worried about you," Tsunade admitted. "Even after a week this whole place is like a stack of explosive notes near an open flame. The people here are still way too angry. I'm afraid of what might happen."

Kushina shrugged. "Fine, want to stay?"

Tsunade frowned. "No."

Kushina laughed. She reached out and gave the woman a hug. "Don't worry about me; I'll be fine and so will Naruto. I think the worst is over now. There haven't been any more incidents since the first night."

"You had a Sanin staying with you that whole time," she pointed out.

Kushina gave Shizune a hug as well. "Don't worry about me."

"All right, I guess I have to go. Goodbye for now."

"Bye Kushina!" Shizune said.

"Bye you two, come see me again soon."

---

When Tsunade left a few people noticed it and the word whet through the village with surprising speed.

The fearsome Sanin was gone and no longer protecting the demon child.

# The Red Death

No one deliberately planned what happened that night. As with most riots no one had really intended it, rather events conspired to bring people together in the same place at the same time with the same intention. After the sun went down people slowly began to gather. They were not a mob yet, just some very frustrated and angry people who wanted to look at the cause of their anger.

And as all people will do when they gather they began to talk. Of course everyone who was there was of the same opinion; the Kyuubi had to die. That it had been allowed to live this long was past understanding. That that *woman* should be allowed to protect the Kyuubi in the Yondaime's own home was a disgrace. The demon had cost them too much already; there was no way they could take the chance of it attacking them again one day. The demon needed killing, and if Sarutobi forbade his ninja to do it, then it fell on the good people of Konoha to do what had to be done.

No one in the crowd questioned what was being said over and over again. No one asked about the morality of killing a helpless baby whatever the circumstances. No one brought up the fact that Naruto was the Yondaime's own flesh and blood. No one mentioned Jiraiya's and Tsunade's public declaration that Kushina and the Yondaime had been secretly married. No one wondered what their beloved Yondaime would have wanted, or just why Sarutobi had made the choices he had. These questions were never even asked.

Everyone felt the same way, and with each conversation and each agreement it became more and more obvious to them that right was on their side. That a horrible wrong had been committed by the Third that only they would correct. And with every word spoken their feelings were whipped higher. People kept coming and coming, as word spread of the gathering. Soon the street was choked with the common citizenry of Konoha. Looking about the people drew



courage from the size of their gathering. So many people with so much passion could not be wrong.

And then without any sort of signal the crowd began moving. As they moved down the streets bats and irons were put on display. Knives that had been hidden in pockets came out. Conversations became shouts, became rallying cries. A crowd became a mob.

And without any sort of leader or spoken discussion they were hurrying to the Namikaze estates.

---

Sobou saw the crowd and knew what was about to happen. His daughter had been one of the brave ninja who had died fighting against that monster. He had been badly burned and disfigured. He knew the orders from the Hokage were that Naruto be protected. From the day Sobou had first received the hitai-ite he had never once thought seriously of disobeying an order. Now though he decided that his duty to safeguard the village required that of him.

He too headed for the Namikaze mansion.

---

Kushina and Kaede were both in the nursery. Naruto had been fed and was sleeping peacefully in his crib.

"He looks exactly like his father did when he was a babe," Kaede noted.

Kushina smiled. "I can't wait to show him off to my family. And it'll be a relief to have my mother here to help."

Kaede looked over at her. "Have you found my care for him unsatisfactory?"

"No! No! Not at all! You're a wonderful nanny!" Kushina answered quickly. "It's just that it'll be a comfort to have my mother here, that's all."

Kaede considered that and nodded. "That is true Kushina-sama; a child should get to know his grandparents. Dear Minato never had that chance. He barely got to know his mother before she was gone."

"Well my little Naru-chan will have plenty of family," Kushina said. "They won't be able to stay but he'll get to know them."

Kaede was going to reply when a young servant ran into the nursery. The man looked frightened.

"Kushina-sama! There's a huge crowd approaching the gate!"

Kushina got a very cold feeling in the pit of her stomach. She was in her ninja dress with her full complement of weapons and supplies. She had the red and black bodysuit of the Uzumaki on with her katana on her back. She was dressed this way as a precaution in case there was trouble. But since the night after the attack there had been no more incidents, just a lot of talk and threats. She'd really hoped the worst was over.

She looked at Kaede. "Please stay here and watch Naruto until I come back. I'm going to see if I can talk to these idiots and calm them down."

"Shall we call the ANBU for assistance? Or Hiashi?" Kaede asked.

Kushina thought about it a second and shook her head. "Not yet, I want to see the situation for myself first. I'd rather not call in the ANBU unless I have to. Naruto and I have to live here, it would be best if I could resolve this peacefully."

She hurried out while Kaede took a seat beside the still sleeping Naruto.

---

What she saw from her gate made her sick. People filled the entire street! There were hundreds of them! All of them shouting for her

baby's blood. It had been a week since the attack. A week for emotions to cool and for people to stop and think about the reality of the situation. And yet there was still *this* much hate?

For a second she thought about going back, grabbing Naruto, and just leaving this damn village. She could take him back to Whirlpool where he might not be a wealthy heir, but he would be surrounded by love and grow up fully accepted. How could she force him to grow up surrounded by this?

But she set her jaw. No. She couldn't take him away. He was Minato's son as much as he was hers. By blood he was the last of the Namikaze. Minato had wanted him to grow up here, had wanted him to follow him as clan head. The mansion and everything that belonged to Namikaze was his birthright. She would *not* run away and let her son be cheated of what was his by a bunch of mindless fools!

The iron gates were chained shut, but she knew they would not hold long if that many people pressed against them. As people came near she leapt to the top of the gates and shouted.

"Stop! You have no right to be here! This is private land!"

The crowd hesitated at the sight of her and the sword in her hand.

"Get out you damn whore!" Someone from the crowd screamed.

A rock flew at her.

It didn't come close. "My son has done nothing! Go home! You have no right to be here!"

"Whore!" Another voice cried. And then another. It quickly became a chant.

"Whore! Whore! Whore!" They cried. More rocks began to be thrown.

To avoid them she leapt back from the gate. The crowd naturally saw this as her retreating from them. They gave a wild shout of joy and suddenly rushed forward up to the gate. The people pressed their chests to the metal bars and strained as others behind them pushed forward. The gates began to give under the pressure.

"What the hell are you people doing?!" She screamed at them. "Why do you want to hurt my son?! What has he done to any of you?!"

They weren't bothering to answer her. All their thoughts and energies were directed towards breaking down the gate.

"If you come onto my property I will kill you!"

They did not seem to hear, or if they did they did not care.

She stood there with her sword ready. She would start killing them the second they broke down her gate. But as she stood there her left forearm itched. Looking down at it she saw the leaf numbered 62 had become red. That was a section of the fence on the opposite side from the gate. Someone was using this distraction to sneak onto her land. She had no choice. She leapt into the trees and raced back to her home.

As she went she heard a loud shout of joy from the mob and knew the gate had been knocked down.

---

Kaede was sitting peacefully waiting for Kushina's return when the window to the nursery was kicked in.

There, standing in the window sill, was Sobou. His eyes were locked on the child in his crib. He did not see a child there. What he saw was a monster in disguise, the source of all his hatred. He did not hesitate as he formed the hand signs. "Die in fire you monster!" He opened his mouth and spat out a stream of flame.

"No!" Kaede cried out. She jumped to her feet and got between Sobou and the crib. Deliberately blocking the fire with her own body. The old maid screamed in pain but remained standing for just those few seconds, then crumbled to the ground her body blazing.

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Sobou was shocked. He hadn't even considered the old woman in the room. The idea someone would sacrifice themselves to protect the Kyuubi had never entered his mind. The child was crying now. He quickly repeated the hand signs, it didn't matter, the monster would die in fire. He was so focused on his target he did not hear or notice Kushina's return. She slammed her katana into the back of his skull, killing him instantly.

---

"Hush my little one, hush, momma is here." She had her son in her arms and was trying to comfort him. That was all she could do now.

She had let Sobou's corpse fall to the ground. She had grabbed a blanket and put out the flames on Kaede. But it was already too late. The dear woman had died protecting Naruto.

*Kaede I am so sorry! Forgive me!* She knew she should have done a better job of securing the mansion. But she had underestimated the danger. *I'll never make that mistake again, and I won't ever try talking to people who want to hurt you my little one.*

"It's all right baby, it's all right," she promised him. She was crying but trying to sound comforting for his sake.

From her place on the second floor she suddenly heard the sound of her front door being smashed in and a whole host of shouts and cries.

"It looks like we have visitors Naruto-kun, your momma needs to go make them feel welcome." She performed some hand signs. **"Kage Bunshin no Jutsu."** A single shadow clone appeared at her side.

The clone took Naruto from her. She then fled. She would take him to the Hyuuga mansion and safety.

With her son safe she headed towards the stairs with a grim smile on her face. She was going to teach the, 'good people' of Konoha something the people of Uzu had known for generations.

That it was not smart to piss off an Uzumaki.

---

People poured into the grand hall from outside. Like animals they smashed everything they could get their hands on. They pulled paintings down from the walls, ripped up curtains, and reduced the furnishings to kindling and scraps of cloth. Without direction of thought more and more people poured in filling the hall. Finally some of them began going up the master stair case.

The first two men were half way up when each got a shuriken in his throat. The men cried and fell back down the stairs as blood poured from their wounds.

"So, you've all come here to murder my son?" A woman's voice called down from the top of the staircase. The crowd already inside quieted down and froze as they felt a ninja's killer intent wash over them. Their eyes looked up and saw her standing there grinning hatefully.

It was at *this* point that some of the mob began to wonder if this had been a good idea.

"So you're all afraid of a helpless little baby huh?" As they watched she pulled out a stack of explosive notes and stabbed a kunai all the way through them. " **I'll give you something to be afraid of!!**" Without even bothering to aim she threw the kunai into the middle of the crowd and ran the other way.

It hit someone in the shoulder merely wounding him. The poor fellow could do nothing but look at the notes as they began to smoke.

**BOOM!!**

One massive explosion killed every person in the grand hall and just outside her door. Most of them were quite literally blown to bits.

Following the deafening explosion the people who had not been killed stood there in shock staring at the wreckage of the front of the Namikaze mansion. Those who had been wounded cried out for help. As people were standing there stunned a rain of shuriken and kunai fell upon them. People cried out and fell, cut down like ripe wheat.

Seeing this brought the others back to their senses. They began to run away in terror.

Kushina ignored the wounded, for now, she would come back for them later. She emptied her pouches of every kunai and shuriken. With that done she chased them down. Everyone she caught received a fatal blow either to the neck or chest. The law was that so long as they were on her property they were subject to whatever punishment she saw fit. If they made it off her land they were subject only to the regular laws of the village.

She wanted to kill very last one of them. And if she couldn't manage that then she wanted to kill as many as she possibly could.

So she chased them. They were no longer any threat; all they wanted now was to escape. But what they wanted now didn't matter to her. They'd come here of their own free will to murder her baby. They could all burn in hell.

As she neared the gate she saw ANBU present. They were detaining those who escaped. Most of the survivors had now gotten out.

One last man ran towards the street and the ANBU who waited to arrest him. He had just about made it when he tripped over the broken gates and fell, just a foot short of the fence. He stumbled back up and got as far as his knees when Kushina's hand felt on the

back of his head. She grabbed a handful of hair and yanked his head painfully back until he was looking up at her.

She was coated in blood, drenched in it. Not only her sword and her clothes but her face and her hair. In the moon light she seemed demonic, an inhuman creature painted in blood. The ANBU and those who had survived all stared at her as she rested her sword on his neck.

"Me... mercy," he begged. "Please."

From amid the ANBU ranks Kakashi stepped forward. He did something almost unheard of for an ANBU while on active duty. He took off his mask. "Kushina," he said calmly. "It's all over; please let us take him in to face justice." He then spoke in an urgent whisper. "Everyone is watching you. Whatever you do now will be talked about by the whole village come the morning."

Kushina looked at him and considered that. "Good point," she looked at her prisoner. "Ask me again for mercy."

Pale and frightened he spoke. "Please, mercy."

"Granted," she said in an easy voice. "I give you the same mercy that you would have given my son. The mercy of a quick death." And with one quick clean motion her katana sliced through his neck. His blood shot into the air wetting both her and Kakashi before the lifeless corpse pitched forward. The head she had in her hand she tossed into the street like a ball.

"You didn't have to do that!" A woman who was now under arrest shrieked.

"And you didn't have to come here tonight," Kushina calmly replied. "I tried showing mercy once and this is what I got for it. From now on I'll kill *anyone* who comes onto my property without permission. We'll see how that works." She turned around and began walking away. "Now if you'll excuse me I have a bunch of wounded I need to kill."



Kakashi and the ANBU could do nothing. She was within her rights.

Before that night Kushina's reputation was that of a whore or seductress. Her major claim to fame the fact she had somehow wormed her way into Minato's bed. But following that night her reputation changed forever. Both the ANBU and the people arrested could not get the image of a blood drenched Kushina mercilessly taking a life and washing in the blood. That image of a red Kushina giving death as people watched stayed with everyone who saw it. Before long it gave rise to a new name.

Kushina, the red death.

# Letting go

**Author's Note:** This is the final chapter. I hope you have enjoyed it. My thanks to all of you have read and left your reviews.

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The next day a number of construction workers came to the Namikaze mansion. A great deal of work would have to be done. The Grand Hall and much of the first floor had been destroyed in the blast and would take weeks to be fully repaired. A new and stronger iron gate was being set up. All along the perimeter of her estate spools of barbed wire were being placed on top of the eight foot high fence. She had also ordered two hundred pieces of red plywood that were cut in three square foot sections. She ordered a message written on each one and then had the workers place them along the entire length of the fence. The message read:

' All trespassers shall be killed on sight and without warning. Enter these grounds only if you seek death.'

While the construction was going on Kushina had some shadow clones keeping a close eye on everyone. In the meanwhile her real self and her baby were temporarily staying with the Hyuuga.

---

A week had passed since the attack on the estate. It would be about a month for the damage to be completely repaired.

"Thank you again for allowing me and Naruto to stay here while they work on my home." Kushina said. She was having lunch with Hiashi and his immediate family.

"Think nothing of it Kushina," Hiashi assured her.

"Why don't you and Naruto move in here permanently?" His brother Hizashi asked. "It would be safer that way."

Kushina shook her head. "Thank you, but no. Naruto needs to grow up there. That mansion is his proper home and will be his when he comes of age. I'm not going to have him chased from it."

Hiashi nodded in understanding. "Well, you and your son will always have a safe haven here whenever you need it."

She bowed her head to him. "Thank you Hiashi, you Hannah and Hizashi are among the few true friends I have left in this place and I am truly grateful for your support."

"Dear," a very pregnant Hannah spoke. "I know you want him to grow up there but wouldn't it be better for him to be here? At least for a few years? He can grow up with Neji and my little girl as play mates."

"I'll bring him over regularly so they can play together, and your children will always be welcome. But I want him to stay in the mansion whenever I'm there. Any time I have to be away I'll bring him here."

As they ate a cadet branch member approached. "Pardon me Hiashi-sama, but a message has just arrived here for Kushina. It is from Whirlpool and marked urgent."

"Thank you!" She took the letter eagerly. "I sent a message back home the morning after my son was born. I've been waiting this whole time for a reply." She'd wanted to send the letter out by ninja courier. That was the fastest and surest way to deliver messages. (Unless you had messenger birds.) Unfortunately with all the chaos following the Kyuubi's attack no ninja were available for regular missions. She had been forced to rely on the regular post. Checking the markings on the envelope she was surprised to note it had been sent back by regular post as well. *I would have thought for sure my father would have sent a courier to deliver this.* She hoped Whirlpool had not suffered too badly and everyone was all right. The Kyuubi had not been within two hundred miles of her home village, so she

didn't think it could have suffered too badly. The Kyuubi had gotten within two miles of Konoha and most of the village was still standing.

Ripping open the envelope she pulled out a long letter. She noticed immediately that it was not written in her father's hand or in her mother's. That immediately worried her. She quickly saw it was written by her uncle Saishu. As she began reading it she gasped. "Oh, dear kami no!"

"What's the matter dear?" Hannah asked.

"Whirlpool, there... there was a terrible earthquake."

"Was there a lot of damage?" Hizashi asked.

"Yes," she said in a lifeless voice. "The... the village was... was leveled and al... almost everyone killed. A part of it slid... slid into the sea. Including my clan's compound. Every... everyone there was killed. My whole clan... except for my uncle died." She saw wet spots appear on the letter and abruptly realized she was crying.

Hannah was beside embracing her and pressing her face to her chest as she comforted her friend. "Oh Kushina! Oh my dear, I am so sorry."

"They're... they're all gone, my... my whole family is gone!" She cried out.

"No dear," Hannah said to her. "You still have Naruto, you still have your son, and you at least have your uncle. You still have family."

Through her tears she nodded. That was something, she was *not* alone. But all she could think of was her father, her mother, her brother Temjin, all her cousins, her aunts and uncles, all the people she had just lost. She would never see them again, just like Minato, just like Kaede. Despite the shame she couldn't help but cry even in front of fellow ninja. Neither Hiashi nor Hizashi said a word they left it to Hannah to comfort her.

---

The next day Kushina appeared in the Tower. The ninja and civilians who spotted her all spoke behind her back. Though it was a very different sort of talk than it had used to be.

One mother pointed the woman out to her young daughter on the street. "Do you see that woman over there Lucu? Her name is Kushina and she is a terrible monster, she cuts people's heads off!"

The five years old stared at the fearsome looking woman and paled. "She does mommy?"

The woman nodded. "And bad little girls who don't do what they're told will have her come and cut their heads right off!"

The girl began to cry.

Seeing the effect the story had a few other mothers who had overheard decided to tell their children a similar tale. The children would hear about the red woman Kushina who would come for them if they were bad. The woman some people were starting to refer to as the Red Death.

---

"I need to hire a mission," she told Sarutobi.

"We are a bit short of ninja at the moment," he told her. "Is this something urgent?"

"To me it is, I need to hire a courier to deliver a message to Whirlpool and wait there to bring the response."

Sarutobi shook his head. "We're not running courier missions right now. After all the losses we suffered against the Kyuubi, and after all the ninja and medic nin who are out on humanitarian missions to places that were stricken we just don't have enough ninja left for low rank C missions."

"Then rank it a B and charge me for B, I'll pay for it," she said. There were times when being rich did have its advantages.

The old Hokage looked at her in surprise but nodded. "Very well If you do not object to the cost."

"Here," she handed him the letter. "Please have it sent out as soon as possible."

"Kushina are you all right?' he asked.

"No, not even slightly." She left the Tower without saying more. She didn't want sympathy or to talk about it. She was growing accustomed to losing the people she loved.

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In the letter her uncle Saishu had asked her to bring Naruto and return to what was left of the village so that the three of them could try and restore their clan.

It was a noble dream, but a foolish one. With the village and ninja gone it was only a matter of time before the Iwa nin swarmed in to take everything. She was not about to bring Naruto anywhere near the rock nins. If they learned whose son he was they would send an army after him.

Besides, her son was a Namikaze; he would have to restore that clan. His future was here in Konoha, not in the shattered ruins of Uzu. She too could not help; she wasn't having any more children. She had decided and not even for her clan's sake would she change her mind. The best thing for her uncle to do was to come here and join her. As the last living member of her family she would welcome him with open arms. If he wanted to try and father some more children she would help him find a wife. The Uzumaki would no longer be a clan, but they could keep the family name alive. With the shortage of ninja she was sure Sarutobi would be happy to enroll a Jonin and sword master. And maybe in time it would even be possible to gain clan status.

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She got back his answer just four days later.

Her disbelieving eyes she read his answer. It was a, 'no.' To the Uzumaki family loyalty had always come before everything else. As his only remaining family she felt it was his duty to come and support her. She wanted the comfort of his presence and wisdom of his counsel. She wanted her son to get to know him.

But instead he wrote to her that his duty was to remain near the village and their ancestral lands. She wrote him more letters, asking pleading, demanding, and finally begging him to come to Konoha and stay with her. She took a picture of her young son and sent it to him hoping the sight of his living grand nephew might change his mind.

It didn't.

After several months of this she finally gave up with bitter resentment, she felt he had abandoned her and her son. In her last letter she informed him she no longer considered him kin and would have nothing more to do with him.

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Three years had passed. The feelings in the village had cooled just a little, but only enough to bring things from full boil down to a low simmer. She was in the Hyuuga mansion with her son to celebrate Hinata's third birthday. Watching her son play innocently with Hinata and Neji made her happy. She wished her son could remain a happy child forever. But it was impossible. He would get about one more year of childhood, and then she would begin training him in the ninja arts.

As she watched Naruto was hugging the little Hyuuga girl playfully and she was laughing. The two of them were so cute together.

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Mommy, what's a Hokage?"

"Well son, the Hokage is the strongest ninja in the village, the one chosen to lead. It is his job to protect and guide the village and the people who live here."

Naruto had looked up at her with wide eyes. "So he protects everyone and keeps them safe?"

She nodded. "That's right, that was what your father did and what the Third Lord does." She had told him many stories about his father and Kakashi and Rin had told him many more. He knew how hard his father had worked to protect the village

"That's what I'm going to do!" Naruto shouted. "I'm going to be Hokage and protect everyone! And I'll be the best Hokage ever!"

"Are you sure Naruto-kun? That's a fine goal, but being Hokage is very hard and requires a lot of sacrifices. You don't only have to be the best ninja in the village. You also have to be prepared to do whatever the village requires. Are you sure you want to make so many sacrifices for these villagers?" *The same ones who came here trying to kill you?* He didn't know about **that** or about how most of the people here hated him. She sheltered him from that.

"That's what I'll do!" Naruto said with absolute confidence.

Kushina looked at her son and knew there was no way he could understand just what being Hokage *truly* meant. The sacrifices it required. But for now...

"If that's what you want then I'll help you get there."

"Really mommy?"

"Of course," she smiled and kissed her son's cheek. "I will always help you reach your dream Naruto-kun."

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Mai and Dita were at a small café with their three year old daughters following a day of shopping.

"Well will you look at that!" Dita suddenly said.

Mai looked out and there she was, walking down the other side of the street. None other than the legendary Uzumaki Kushina, the woman they had both lost out to. She didn't seem to notice them and continued to walk; drawing glares from people on the street.

"Mommy!" Mai's little daughter said pointing. "Is that the bad woman?"

Mai smiled. "Yes honey, that is Kushina the red death. If you do bad things she comes for you."

The little girl cried and buried her face against her mother's body afraid to look in the direction where Kushina was.

"What are you doing?" Dita asked with a frown.

"What?' Mai asked.

"Why are you telling your daughter those stories?"

"What, you don't?"

"No as a matter of fact," Dita answered. "I would never tell Ino such things. I think that family has suffered enough, they didn't ask for what happened."

Mai frowned as well. "Maybe not, but you *know* what that boy is."

"He is Minato's son," Dita said quietly. "Whatever else he is he will always be that."

Mai looked a little angry. "That doesn't change what he *really* is." She had been married just over a year when her husband had been killed fighting the Kyuubi. Since then her husband's family had turned it s

back on her and Sakura so she had changed back to her maiden name of Haruno. She had loved her husband and they had been happy together. But that happy life had been shredded in a single night.

"You can't blame a little child for something he had no part in." Dita said.

"I can blame him for whatever I want."

The two old friends looked at one another.

"Come on Sakura," Mai stood and put some money on the table.  
"We're going now."

Dita sat there in silence and watched her old friend go. Their friendship did not end, but from that time on they would drift apart.

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As she did every night Kushina made a handful of shadow clones before going to bed wearing her armor and bodysuit. She kept her sword and equipment on a table by her bed. She could be fully armed and ready in under twenty seconds. She was not sleeping well. When she'd gone to bed it had been October ninth, when she woke up it would be October tenth. It would be her son's birthday as well as the Festival of Salvation. The annual festival that marked the defeat of the Kyuubi.

There would be a mass parade that would snake all the way through the village, including past her gate, ending at the shrine where her husband's body had been laid to rest. Then there would be feasting and dancing and general celebration culminating in a massive fireworks display.

If that had been all she would have tolerated it. She could not take any joy at being reminded about the Kyuubi or her husband's death, but she would have endured it without comment and concentrated on celebrating Naruto's birthday.

But every October tenth people got excited about the Kyuubi and some of them always felt the need to try and do something about it. She was getting very sick of having people coming onto her property thinking they had almost an obligation to hurt her baby. He was turning four tomorrow and she was sure that at some point she would have to go and kill some idiots rather than spend her time playing with her son.

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She felt a twinge on her left forearm and came awake immediately. As she bolted out of bed and put on her equipment she glanced at the clock. It was 4:19 a.m. "These damn idiots can't even wait for this stupid festival?"

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She contacted the ANBU and left her shadow clones to protect Naruto. They moved him to a different room in the mansion and watched over him in the dark. The original meanwhile rushed out to the appropriate section of the fence to deal with the threat.

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When she got here she was amazed at what she found. Six *completely* drunken idle aged men were climbing all over each other trying to scale the eight foot high fence. The idiots had thought to bring ropes and thick blankets to toss over the barbed wire. But they weren't having much luck climbing the ropes.

She got on her radio communicator and informed her clones to cancel the call to the ANBU, they wouldn't be needed. She sat on a nearby tree branch and watched as these morons struggled to get over her fence. It was actually comical.

She thought about actually just letting them go.

Then she noticed the bats and broken bottles they had brought with them along with their ropes and blankets. Comical or not, drunken or not, these men would stab him with those pieces of jagged glass and

beat him to death with their bats if they could. The fact they had no such ability didn't make their intentions any less serious.

And they had already woken her up.

One of them stood on the shoulder of another and somehow got up to the top of the fence. With his help one by one the rest all managed it. It took more than forty minutes but all six finally made it down onto her property.

"Congratulations," she said as she walked up to them. "You must all be very proud."

One of them waved a bat at her. "Out of your way or..."

His head flew off with one slice of her katana. His blood pumped about four feet into the air before his body fell.

His five companions all shouted and looked frightened and suddenly very sober.

"You killed him!" One of them screamed.

Kushina just looked at him feeling annoyed. "What did you *think* I was going to do? Honestly don't people read the signs?" No longer amused she made swift work of them, chopping all their heads from their bodies.

Looking at the bodies she felt angry at the thought that a parade of people would be going past in a few hours with people probably dreaming of hurting Naruto. *I'd like to show all of them these heads! Then maybe they'd get a real idea of what trying to hurt my son means.* She tried to imagine that. All those oh so happy villagers being forced to look at some of their fellows who had tried to do the thing they all wanted to. *Hmmm, well... why don't I?*

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"Kushina! You can't leave them there!" Kakashi said horrified. He was in ANBU uniform and along with three other ANBU was pleading with her to be sensible.

She had taken the six heads and oiled them into a little pyramid just outside her gate but still on her property.

"I promise I'll have them taken away, *after* the parade," she said.

"You'll ruin the parade!" One ANBU with a boar's mask pleaded. "What will people think when they see this?!"

"That they should pay more attention to the signs I post." She said.

"Kushina if people see this they'll say you're a monster!" Kakashi said.

"They already say that," she told him. "If you listen to some people I spend all my free time roaming the streets looking for bad children. By rights no one should even be shocked; I'm just living up to my reputation."

"Kushina..."

"The heads are on my property, they stay." She said.

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The show had the exact effect she'd hoped for. She remained by her gate to make sure no one tried to disturb the heads. She watched as happy revelers suddenly looked sick as they saw her there by her handiwork. She knew the story about this would spread and get blown out of proportion. Before long it would be a hundred heads and they would all be from naughty little children. But her point was being made to the very people who were most likely to come after her son again.

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When the parade had passed her home she then quietly disposed of them.

She was not surprised when the Hokage summoned her later that day. Sarutobi was probably as angry as she'd ever seen him.

"What were you thinking?! Do you have any idea how many complaints I have had?! From the priests, the merchants, from the clans, and from individuals too! You have ruined this year's festival! Half the usual crowds have gone home!"

"Good," she said without an ounce of apology. "Their probably the same ones who came to my home this morning."

"Why did you kill those men?" The Hokage demanded. "I've been told they were all middle age workers who were drunk. They couldn't have been any threat to you."

"Well no, they weren't." She admitted.

"Then is there was no serious danger why did you kill them?" He demanded.

"Everyone who lives in this village knows where my estate is and who lives there. I have an eight foot high iron fence topped with barbed wire. I have big red signs every few feet warning people that they'll be killed if they trespass. And even with all that these men *still* hated my baby enough to try and hurt him. As far as I'm concerned that was serious enough to warrant killing. And if seeing those heads convinces others not to make the same attempt I consider what I did well worth it."

Sarutobi was furious, but there was nothing he could do. She hadn't broken any laws.

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She took her wooden practice sword and drew a wide circle around herself in the dirt.

"Time for circle drills Naruto-kun, come try and knock mommy out of the circle."

"All right!" He cried eagerly. He came at her with his own wooden sword with all the energy and enthusiasm a seven years old could have.

She smiled as she blocked all his attacks and easily held him off. She was fondly recalling her own circle drills with Urusai. Unlike her Naruto never got upset or frustrated. He loved training with her and never complained. He was turning out to be something of a prodigy. He could already use jutsus and he'd even learned the kage bunshin in *one* day. That a seven year old could do something like that was astounding. Kakashi, Jiraiya, and even Tsunade were all eager to take him as a student.

Next year he would enter the academy. She worried about that. After so many years she hoped the village had finally learned to accept him. But keeping him safe still plagued her mind. Soon she would have to entrust his safety and his education to others. But for now at least he was still hers and her alone.

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"Weird." Naruto said. Without a thought he grabbed Hinata's hand and began leading her to the academy entrance. "Come on Hinata-chan we don't want to be late." He was looking at the academy so completely missed the look of relief on Hinata's face.

Kushina watched the two of them go with a shake of the head. It suddenly occurred to her that of all the lessons she had given her son on history, ethics, math, taijutsu, weapons, chakra control, and other subjects she hadn't spoken to him even once about girls and how to deal with them. She shook her head not believing she had completely forgotten something so vital. *Great I've sent him into battle completely unarmed. Well if he survives today I'll start explaining about girls tonight. After all they're at least as dangerous to him as assassins*

Watching him lead Hinata into the academy, she smiled. He wasn't an adult yet by any stretch. But she was having to let go of him at least a little. *It's all right I suppose, she decided. Where ever he goes he will always have his mother's love with him.*

**THE END**